Chapter 101 - 101 Different Powers

101 Different Powers

The sound of tinkling bells sent a shiver down Leah's spine. Unable to pinpoint the danger, she instinctively used her Paper Figurine Substitutes.

Her body rapidly shrank and thinned, morphing into a carefully trimmed paper figurine.

The paper figure darkened, turning yellow and brittle as if it had aged a decade in an instant.

Silently, the withered yellow paper disintegrated into countless tiny fragments.

!!

Leah reappeared at the top of the stairs, clutching the kerosene lamp. But in the next moment, she felt the chill on her shoulders.

Her thoughts raced as she raised her right hand and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Activating her Spirit Vision, she glanced at the room across from her and the glass window.

In the dim light of the kerosene lamp, the washroom's glass reflected Leah's upper body.

Transparent, ghostly infants perched on each of her shoulders!

Their faces were round and chubby, their skin a ghastly blue-white. Their expressions twisted in malevolence.

The spectral infants leaned down, pressing their mouths to Leah's neck as if feeding on her essence.

Rather than panic, Leah breathed a sigh of relief.

Identifying the source of the threat was far better than being in the dark!

Now she could assess the situation and make informed decisions.

Just like this!

Leah drew her exquisite silver revolver, aimed at the eerie infant on her left shoulder, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

A golden bullet, wreathed in illusory flames, burst from the barrel.

The infant wailed as it was flung from Leah's shoulder, consumed by the golden fire.

Bang! Leah fired again, this time at the infant above her other shoulder.

The second ghostly child, ablaze with the same intense fire, cried out as it followed its companion down the corridor.

A woman's figure materialized. Her eyes were a piercing blue, her features delicate; her round face framed by disheveled black hair. She was the padre's mistress, Sybil Berry, sister to Shepherd Pierre Berry.

Her skin was coated in a sickly blue hue, and on both sides of her neck, grotesque growths protruded.

The spectral infants returned to her, latching onto the corresponding growths to feed.

As they nursed, the golden flames that engulfed them gradually dissipated.

But Leah would not stand idly by. She aimed at Sybil Berry and pulled the trigger.

With a bang, the golden bullet traversed mere meters before striking Sybil squarely in the forehead.

For some reason, Sybil made no attempt to dodge. A bloody hole bore through her skull.

Within the wound, white and red mixed as illusory golden flames devoured them both.

Clang! Sybil fell lifeless to the floor. The ghostly infants, their pale faces contorted in anguish, vanished.

That's it? Leah couldn't believe it.

The silver bells on her veil and boots continued to tinkle, growing more intense by the second.

In the blink of an eye, Leah felt a cold, malevolent force growing within her.

Frantically, she glanced at the washroom and the glass window. Her skin had taken on a bluish hue at some point.

In the next instant, her body reverted to a paper figurine.

The paper figure crumpled into a ball, hitting the floor with a thud.

Leah reappeared in the bathroom, the icy sensation still growing inside her.

Almost simultaneously, a gentle voice whispered in her ear.

“I made a pact with a strange spirit world creature and gained one of its abilities.

“Whoever kills me, I can be reborn within their body and take control.

“You’re very beautiful. I like it very much. The padre should like you very much too…”

Without hesitation, Leah bolted from the bathroom, silver revolver and kerosene lamp in hand.

She had to find Valentine.

Exorcism was one of the Sun domain’s specialties. They were particularly effective against such threats!

…

Valentine found himself cornered near the balcony.

The area was choked by pitch-black, thorn-covered vines hanging from the ceiling. Blood-red, putrid-smelling flowers bloomed all around.

Valentine spread his arms, summoning golden flames from thin air to incinerate the monstrous flora.

Just then, a figure materialized in midair.

He wore a white robe adorned with golden threads. His black hair was short, his blue eyes solemn, and his nose slightly hooked. He was Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu.

No longer invisible, he floated in the air and gazed down at Valentine. In ancient Hermes, he bellowed,

“Valentine!”

Dark energy flickered within the padre’s robes.

This was an ability Guillaume Bénet had obtained through a contract with a spirit world creature.

...

By invoking the target's true name, he could affect their Soul Body, causing disorientation.

The closer the language was to nature and the spirit world, and the better the understanding of the target, the stronger the effect.

If his Spirit Body was far superior to the target's, he could even extract their spirit, leaving them disoriented and defenseless.

Valentine's head spun as he heard the padre's shout. He suddenly felt dizzy and couldn't think straight.

However, he quickly regained control and shook off the disorientation.

Ever since entering Cordu, he had never revealed his full name. The padre's ability had limited effect on him.

Guillaume Bénet hadn't expected success either. Before Valentine could completely shake off the dizziness, the padre hurled a human bone he had prepared earlier.

As the bone hit the ground, the airborne padre rapidly recited in Hermes, "Blind, deaf, unwakeable."

It was a curse and an ability Guillaume Bénet had gained through a contract.

He cast bones symbolizing death to render the target like the dead—blind and deaf, with unresponsive eyes.

Valentine wasn't asleep, so the curse couldn't render him unconscious. However, the lingering dizziness intensified, blurring his vision and causing his ears to ring. He struggled to see beyond three meters or hear anything further away.

...

Seizing the opportunity, the padre extended his right palm.

His blue eyes took on a hazy, almost ethereal quality.

Complex mercury symbols, reminiscent of tiny rivers, swirled around Valentine. They formed a grand illusory river shimmering with light.

Countless tributaries branched off downstream. As the main river surged forward, most were swallowed up, leaving only one.

Guillaume Bénet observed for a few seconds and snatched one of the mercury symbols just before Valentine broke free from the cursed blindness and deafness.

He intended to amplify the corresponding tributary and make Valentine's fate of being paralyzed by the Abyssal Demon Flowers a reality.

…

Ryan barely managed to dodge the shadow's axe as it slashed down towards him. He quickly discarded the kerosene lamp he had been carrying and donned his silver-white armor. In his hand, a broadsword condensed from light appeared.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan slashed continuously, forcing the shadow back against the wall. The specks of Sunrise Gleam he released covered the surroundings, exorcizing the shadows in the area.

The pitch-black, pale-white, evil, or terrifying arms that were about to reach out from behind the shadow were pushed away, making it hard for them to grab Ryan's body.

With a clang, the shadow shrank back into the wall and reverted to normal.

It disappeared under the illumination of Sunrise Gleam.

Not far away, a remnant shadow enlarged, and Shepherd Pierre Berry, dressed in a long hooded coat, walked out.

He bent down slightly and charged at Ryan with his axe, accumulating powers in his body with every step. After a few steps, Pierre Berry seemed to have the posture and strength of a giant.

Ryan loomed over his opponent, gripping the Sword of Dawn with both hands as he prepared to strike the enemy charging at him like a rampaging bull.

Clang!

The broadsword and axe clashed, sending a shower of sparks in every direction.

Both Pierre Berry and Ryan recoiled simultaneously. One stumbled back three steps to regain balance, while the other only needed one.

Ryan halted his retreat, one leg stretched back, and seized the moment before Pierre Berry could steady himself. He lunged forward, slashing at his adversary.

Just then, Pierre Berry's mouth gaped open.

His tongue bizarrely morphed into a peculiar chameleon.

The chameleon's head was tucked between its legs, a front foot stuffed into its mouth.

The instant Ryan's gaze fell upon the chameleon, he was wracked by a searing pain in his head, so intense that his attack faltered, failing to land.

Headache curse!

Shepherd Pierre Berry had gained this ability through a pact with an enigmatic Spirit Body that had reveled in studying all manner of curses during its life.

Capitalizing on the opportunity to inflict a debilitating headache on Ryan, Pierre Berry summoned the receding shadow back and unleashed a ferocious assault.

Amid the cacophony of clanging metal, Ryan found himself forced to retreat.

…

Amid the chaos outside, Lumian bolted upright and urgently told Aurore, "Something's not right! We have to regroup with Ryan and the others!"

Ryan had drilled this principle into their heads time and time again: In the face of an attack, they had to strive to stay together. A united team was far more effective than five individuals battling solo!

"Okay!" Aurore leaped out of bed and sprinted for the door, reaching into the concealed pocket of her flowing gown.

As Lumian neared the open doorway, he caught sight of a figure—Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue stood before him, garbed in a white robe adorned with gold thread.

The striking, curly-haired youth's eyes were eerily vacant as he offered Lumian a smile.

"Do you want to pray?"

With a swift motion, Lumian yanked his axe free and aimed for Michel's neck.

Michel's head lolled, but only a trickle of blood escaped.

Glancing at Lumian from the corner of his eye, he inquired with a radiant smile, as if nothing had transpired, "Do you want to pray?"

As Lumian prepared to raise his axe and sever the man's neck, an overwhelming sense of danger washed over him.

Relying on his Dancer's uncanny agility, he abruptly spun around and swung the axe behind his back.

In the next second, his gaze froze.

He saw Aurore.

Aurore's light-blue eyes had inexplicably grown vacant. She hurled a handful of powder, ground from some kind of tree, at Lumian.

Gazing upon his sister’s familiar visage, Lumian’s axe strike decelerated until it came to a halt.

He even forgot to evade.

A crackling noise erupted as a sphere of silver lightning struck Lumian’s head.

He fainted.

Darkness swallowed his vision.

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Chapter 102 - 102 Transfer

102 Transfer

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan retreated, barely managing to parry Shepherd Pierre Berry's relentless onslaught.

Pierre Berry's eyes were bloodshot, the gentleness gone, replaced by a ferocious rage.

As sinister arms, either pitch-black or ghostly white, reached from the shadows to ensnare Ryan, Pierre Berry swung his axe at Ryan's head.

This time, Ryan didn't parry or retreat. He didn't even raise the Sword of Dawn.

Instead, he twisted his body, allowing the eerie arms to grasp his legs and Pierre Berry's axe to strike his shoulder.

Clang!

Spiderweb-like cracks spread across the silver pauldron, light flaking off and dissipating.

Grimacing in pain, Ryan genuflected, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the floor.

He knew he'd been separated from his allies for too long. He needed to regroup at any cost.

The strength of a team surpassed that of any individual!

In a split second, the light-infused two-handed broadsword detonated.

It shattered into countless light fragments, morphing into a hurricane that barreled towards Pierre Berry.

Panic flickered in Pierre Berry's eyes at the devastating blow.

Ignoring the malevolent arms, he retreated into his own shadow.

A fierce storm of pure light engulfed the area, slicing shadows and evil into shreds.

As an area-of-effect attack, Hurricane of Light inevitably impacted Ryan's surroundings, despite his best efforts to direct it towards his enemy.

Silently, the walls of Lumian's and Aurore's bedrooms crumbled, reduced to tiny fragments in the terrifying storm.

Near the balcony, pitch-black vines hanging from the roof writhed like tortured weeds. Even Padre Guillaume Bénet, suspended in midair, had no choice but to hastily dodge.

Bloodied scratches marred his body as he fled Aurore's house.

Rumble!

Half the roof had been obliterated, the second floor pockmarked with gaping holes. In many places, the stove below was visible.

Leah was also caught in the storm of light, her figure rapidly withering and shrinking, transforming into a paper figurine.

When the tempest subsided, she reappeared in the study, barely intact.

Ryan knew she had Paper Figurine Substitutes, allowing him to unleash such a brutal attack on Pierre Berry in a confined space.

As for Aurore, Lumian, and Valentine, their positions offered some protection from the attack. Ryan had tried to control the storm's direction, with limited success.

After assessing the situation, he decided to use this decisive attack.

Crimson moonlight and faint starlight streamed through the ruined roof. Ryan scanned the area but saw no sign of Aurore or Lumian. Leah, pale-faced, was rushing towards him. Valentine lay unconscious on the balcony, numerous wounds from the Hurricane of Light, but none lethal.

Seeing his battered allies, Ryan stopped searching. He grabbed Leah's shoulder and leaped to the balcony.

With one hand, the Warrior hoisted Valentine and jumped from the Lumian residence.

Relying on his not-yet-shattered Dawn Armor to withstand further ambushes, he raced towards the edge of Cordu Village, fleeing to the nearest mountain pasture.

They had a plan: if they couldn't defend Aurore and Lumian's homes, they'd retreat to the pasture.

There, they could use the terrain to their advantage, escape by leaping off the cliff, and trigger the cycle.

Padre Guillaume Bénet hovered above, unable to match the Dawn Paladin's top speed.

Beneath him, Shepherd Pierre Berry emerged from the shadows at the edge of the house.

His dark robe was shredded, the hood long gone. His face, chest, and legs bore deep gashes, blood oozing relentlessly. It was a chilling sight.

Had he not swapped his shadow with that of a villager at the crucial moment, he'd be dead with his body torn to shreds!

The villager who had served as his pawn was now undoubtedly a mangled heap of flesh and blood.

…

As Ryan obliterated the Abyss Demon Flower with his Hurricane of Light, Valentine's paralysis waned. He regained consciousness before they left Cordu Village.

"What's the situation?" he inquired, his voice muffled by the wind.

Ryan, running at full speed, couldn't elaborate. He replied tersely, "Help Leah first!"

Valentine glanced at Leah, cradled in Ryan's other arm, and noticed her pallid, ashen face.

Without a moment's hesitation, he stretched out his hand with great effort and placed his palm on Leah's shoulder.

"Sun!"

He cried out in ancient Hermes.

Glistening golden droplets materialized out of nowhere, raining down on Leah.

Her expression contorted, and steam rose from her body.

Within seconds, Sybil's ethereal figure was expelled, her face filled with shock and terror.

She couldn't fathom how she'd been ejected from Leah's body.

Immediately after, ghostly golden flames erupted from the void, engulfing the bizarre spirit like a candle, reducing it to liquid droplets.

Sybil shrieked and cursed, but couldn't evade her fate of being purified.

This time, she failed to reincarnate in Valentine's body.

"Vile creature!" Valentine muttered under his breath.

...

…

Shepherd Pierre Berry looked up at Guillaume Bénet, who hovered above, and asked, "Should we chase them?"

Despite his injuries, he refused to surrender.

Guillaume Bénet pondered for a moment and responded, "No need. Our priority lies here.

"They won't make any moves in the short term. They'll only observe and assess the situation. That's enough for us."

As he finished speaking, he furrowed his brow and whispered, "Sybil's dead."

"Can't she be 'reborn'?" Pierre Berry asked, surprised.

He wasn't particularly distraught over his sister's demise.

Guillaume Bénet couldn't help but curse, "I warned her not to use Rebirth in front of the three official Beyonders. Rebirth at this level is inherently countered by the power of the Sun pathway, but she didn't listen.

"Imbecile! What a waste of the Lord's gift!"

…

...

Lumian's eyes snapped open, taking in the wispy gray fog and the familiar ceiling above.

He had awoken within the dream ruins after losing consciousness.

Gasping for breath, Lumian struggled to sit up straight.

As Aurore's attack struck him, he had been filled with despair, thinking it was better to just surrender.

She could reclaim the beautiful life she had granted him, along with the five years she had given him.

Phew… Lumian exhaled sharply as two realizations pierced his thoughts.

That wasn't Aurore. She was possessed by a monster!

To give up now would be to abandon her to the creature and snuff out her last hope!

Lumian rose to his feet, his resolve steeling within him.

He glanced toward the window and spotted a bottle of liquor, a honeysuckle flower, some grapevines, and fern powder.

Had that woman sent these materials? Had she witnessed the attack? Why hadn't she… Lumian shook his head, dispelling his intrusive thoughts.

In this dire circumstance, he could only rely on himself and his allies. No matter how powerful others may be, they were useless to him now!

Wasting no more time, Lumian retrieved the instruments he'd used to brew the Hunter potion and poured 50 milliliters of liquor into a beer mug.

He added the honeysuckle flower, grapevine powder, and fern powder, one after the other. Lastly, the repulsive "stone" with its dark, flowing liquid surface.

A sizzling sound accompanied the dissolution of the Provoker Beyonder characteristic, and the honeysuckle flower vanished.

The colorless liquor in the mug turned a deep black, becoming viscous. The mere sight of the potion made Lumian want to hurl it away and stomp it into oblivion.

He steadied himself, using shallow Cogitation to calm his nerves and focus.

Moments later, Lumian snatched up the beer mug without hesitation, gulping down the foul, pungent Provoker potion.

Setting the mug down, he immediately felt his insides grow heavy, as if plummeting.

Drawing on his experience, Lumian sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, bracing for the next transformation.

His breaths became heated, his emotions veering wildly between anger, sorrow, frustration, and exhilaration.

Simultaneously, a voice—infinitely distant yet intimately close—assailed his ears, drilling into his temples like an iron spike.

Familiar, searing pain engulfed Lumian's mind, but he couldn't shake certain thoughts.

I must succeed!

I must unlock the secret of the dream!

I must save Aurore!

I must shatter the loop in Cordu!

Enduring the scorching, tearing sensation and the illusion of losing control, Lumian didn't open his eyes or alter his posture.

He felt like a tiny vessel in a tempest, battered by waves and gales. Powerless, but not yet submerged.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain began to ebb as the bloodthirsty, insane thoughts receded from Lumian's consciousness.

He opened his eyes, knowing he had ascended to a Sequence 8 Provoker.

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Chapter 103 - 103 The Padre’s Plan

103 The Padre’s Plan

A dense white fog hung heavy in the sky, swallowing most of the light and casting the dream ruins into a perpetual twilight.

Lumian stood, stretching his limbs and surveying the blood-streaked mountain peak as he assessed his condition.

In comparison to Hunter, the Provoker’s strength, reflexes, speed, and agility had improved, albeit modestly.

Lumian identified three primary changes:

First, his body had grown more robust and his recuperative abilities had seemingly improved.

Second, his spirituality had increased to a certain extent. He could now maintain his possession state for four minutes, up from just three.

Lastly, he had gained a Beyonder power called Provocation.

This ability induced a permanent state change while also requiring active activation to achieve its desired effect.

Lumian’s observation skills had experienced a qualitative transformation, far surpassing those of an ordinary person. He could now effectively discern which words, actions, and situations would most easily trigger his target’s sensitivities and provoke agitation.

When Provocation was employed, it merged insults and humiliation, causing the target to lose their composure.

The more tailored the taunts and humiliation, the more effective the Provocation. However, even a single word like “dogshit” could still incite anger to some degree.

Against an uncommunicative opponent, Provocation allowed Lumian to exude a repugnant aura.

This ability was well-suited to the traps and ambushes Hunters excelled in, but it held little meaning for Lumian in his present state.

He no longer had time for hunting. His sole focus was exploring the “wall” surrounding the blood-stained “peak” and uncovering the secret of the dream

ruins.

In contrast, the enhancements to his spirituality and physical resilience pleased him. At the very least, he could now delve further into the dark area that once lulled him to sleep.

With the potion's boost, Lumian massaged his temples.

This time, activating his Spirit Vision was seamless.

He finally had the capacity to easily invoke his Spirit Vision.

Without hesitation, Lumian changed his clothes and gathered his gear: Fallen Mercury, the iron-black axe, a cloth bag of cheese and biscuits. He slung his shotgun over his back and exited the two-story semi-subterranean building. Amidst the muted gray fog, he traversed the wilderness and entered the ruins.

He followed a familiar path, avoiding areas where monsters might lurk, and proceeded cautiously.

Upon reaching the area where he had encountered the three-faced monster, Lumian danced, partially triggering the black thorn symbol.

With the "amulet," he navigated increasingly treacherous terrain and repelled several horrifying creatures.

At last, he arrived at the thorny "wall" formed by an array of houses.

After a moment's consideration, Lumian chose a direction.

He resolved to enter the area that seemed to be shrouded in night, a place that instantly plunged him into a drowsy haze.

His intuition suggested that something significant lay beyond the towering wall of twisted trees. However, the area resembling the onset of night held a greater likelihood of harboring the secret of the dream ruins.

After all, "night," "slumber," and "dream" were often related terms.

In due course, Lumian, having performed another ritual dance, found himself in a place noticeably dimmer than its surroundings.

He exhaled slowly and stepped forward with determination.

Almost immediately, Lumian felt as though he had transitioned from a foggy day to a cloudy evening. Shadows enveloped the objects around him.

Clutching Fallen Mercury, he yawned and pressed on.

I can't sleep. I can't sleep! Lumian urged himself forward.

As he proceeded, Lumian remained vigilant, scrutinizing the buildings that formed the city wall. Yet, the secrets of the dream ruins eluded him.

Gold coins and other trinkets held no interest for him.

Delving deeper, he trudged dozens of meters, his willpower alone keeping his eyes open against the overwhelming drowsiness that engulfed his mind.

After a moment's contemplation, he opted for retreat. He would investigate the area behind the wooden wall and enter this sleep-inducing zone from another angle.

Perhaps that would grant him access to previously unreachable locations.

Lumian pivoted and retraced his steps, but the drowsiness persisted, growing in intensity with each passing moment.

At last, his resolve crumbled. His eyes slid shut, and he slumped to the ground.

Darkness consumed his vision once more.

…

Lumian was suddenly gripped by a sharp pain in his abdomen, causing him to curl up and open his eyes.

First, he saw a dazzling mural with a curved dome, followed by the stern visage of the padre along with his slightly hooked nose, and Pons Bénet's right fist, which he withdrew with a sinister grin.

I've been captured and brought to the cathedral? Lumian recognized the scene overhead and instinctively scanned his surroundings.

He saw Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, Ava's father, Guillaume Lizier, his neighbor Louis Bedeau, and nearly all the villagers.

The altar had transformed beyond recognition, now adorned with lilacs, tulips, and other symbols of that hidden entity instead of sunflowers.

The Sun Sacred Emblem had vanished, replaced by an unnaturally twisted thorn ring, seemingly oozing black liquid.

Spotting the familiar symbol, Lumian felt a wave of dizziness as heat surged in his chest.

He knew this was a sign that the corruption within him had been stirred but remained trapped within the bluish-black symbol.

The padre and his followers have turned the cathedral into an altar for the hidden entity? Poor St. Sith… Lumian imagined Valentine would go berserk upon seeing

this.

Bound tightly, he surveyed his surroundings, relieved to find the stained glass and murals depicting the great Eternal Blazing Sun and St. Sith's preaching unscathed.

It seems the alterations were hastily made… Lumian deduced the cathedral's current state.

The villagers stood eerily silent, like wax figures.

After observing Lumian for a moment, the padre scolded Pons Bénet.

...

"How could you let him sleep? You should have woken him up as soon as you brought him back to the cathedral!"

"Understood," Pons Bénet replied, his gaze unusually deferential, as if the padre were his deity or ruler.

Leaning against a pillar, Lumian glanced up at Guillaume Bénet. "Where's Aurore?"

The padre smiled cryptically. "You'll find out soon enough."

"What about the three foreigners?" Lumian frantically devised an escape plan while trying to maintain the conversation.

Guillaume Bénet gazed through the stained glass, his expression relaxed. "They've escaped. They should be at the nearest alpine pasture by now. But don't expect them to rescue you and Aurore tonight. Knowing the officials, they'll stall and merely observe. They'll only act after confirming the situation. Sometimes, they'd rather do nothing than make a mistake. That's how they wasted a decade of mine."

Lumian conceded the padre's point, but he knew that wasn't why Ryan and the others were waiting.

Without understanding why the evil god's followers had captured him and Aurore, Ryan's group wouldn't take drastic measures, like triggering the loop's reboot by leaving Cordu. They wanted to wait until the twelfth night to uncover the cause of the disturbance here, laying a solid foundation for escaping the predicament in the future.

Lumian's silence caused the padre's grin to widen.

In a matter-of-fact tone, he announced, "I plan to complete the ritual tonight."

What? Lumian was baffled.

...

In high spirits, Guillaume Bénet patiently elaborated, “I intend to move the April 9th ritual to tonight. The three foreigners won’t have a chance to interfere.”

What? The twelfth night can be moved up? Lumian was shocked, speechless, and inexplicably terrified.

At that moment, Guillaume Bénet turned to Pons Bénet and instructed, “Before taking him to the altar, ensure he stays awake. You may use any method, just don’t kill him.”

Pons Bénet asked eagerly, “What if I kill him?”

“We’ll die together!” The padre glared at his dim-witted brother.

Send me to the altar and start the ritual again? Could the bluish-black symbol on me be useful again? Lumian’s nerves steadied as he listened to the Bénet brothers’ conversation.

The padre redirected his gaze to Lumian and leaned down. “Don’t worry, you’re not the vessel. We have a better choice.”

A better choice? Lumian’s alarm grew as he followed the padre’s gaze to the original altar.

Aurore had appeared there at some point in time, dressed in a plain white robe, her golden hair unadorned and her light-blue eyes vacant.

“Aurore!” Lumian cried out.

Aurore remained statue-like, unresponsive.

The padre smiled and nodded.

“Yes, your sister is the superior vessel. Your role in the ritual is to help us expedite the timeline. We needn’t wait for that exact moment or the shift in the constellations.”

Lumian was terrified and bewildered.

Why can I help bring forward the twelfth night’s ritual?

The padre leaned in once more, a smile of anticipation on his face.

“Because most of the boons we’d prayed for are within you.”

What? How does he know? Lumian’s eyes widened, straining to scrutinize Guillaume Bénet’s face more closely.

Guillaume Bénet leaned in and whispered into Lumian’s ear, “Did you really think you and Pualis were the only ones able to retain memories in the loop?”

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Chapter 104 - 104 Resolute Decision

104 Resolute Decision

Upon seeing Lumian's blatant shock, Guillaume Bénet straightened up with satisfaction and said to Pons Bénet, "Keep an eye on him!"

With that, the padre strode towards the altar.

As he left, the villagers around them seemed to come alive, engaging in animated conversations.

"The horoscope is about to change."

"Our good fortune is coming!"

"It won't be long before we're wealthy!"

"When the time comes, I'll drink a bottle of wine every day and eat a pound of meat every meal!"

"I want to find a beautiful woman."

"I'm going to watch a play."

"…"

Lumian's mind was a whirlwind, and he barely noticed when Guillaume Bénet departed.

The padre's words were like a boulder tossed into a placid lake, sending ripples through Lumian's thoughts.

How is that possible?

In the previous cycle, I killed him because he didn't understand what made me special!

Back then, I didn't even know what was so special about myself. It was natural for him not to know… After that battle, he didn't have any conflicts with me in the subsequent cycles until Aurore began acting strangely…

But he didn't seem to know about the loop at all. The cursing he did when I led the rest to catch him in the adulterous act, him being knocked out by Leah after we infiltrated the cathedral, and being spied upon by Aurore using White Paper didn't

seem fake at all!

If he was putting on an act, his level of restraint would be bone-chilling…

Moreover, he knows that Madame Pualis retains her memories in the loop and might know something about the abnormalities in the castle. Yet he still had an affair with Madame Pualis at the beginning of each loop, allowing no one to suspect him.

If it were me, I wouldn't even have desires after finding out what Madame Pualis had done, let alone sleep with her!

The more Lumian pondered, the more he found the padre terrifying. This fear was unlike the terror he felt from Madame Pualis.

Questions swarmed his mind:

Why didn't the padre with his memories sacrifice the three sheep from the beginning and obtain the corresponding boon to take full control of Cordu? Why didn't he complete the twelfth night ritual on the first day?

This could have prevented any accidents!

What was he waiting for? The sacrificial ritual only takes place near Lent every time…

Does that ritual have a date and time requirement?

The Lent celebration is an integral part of the twelfth night's ritual. So, the padre will only have a chance to advance the subsequent ritual after Lent is over?

But he could just control everyone from the beginning and wait for Lent to arrive…

Also, didn't the hidden existence find it odd that they prayed for a boon twice across three cycles? Yes, He might have done something, like helping the padre recover his memories!

No, if their sacrificial ritual had truly been completed, the three sheep wouldn't have entered the loop again. Their spirits and Beyonder characteristics should have gone to the hidden existence.

Could it be that, like Reimund, the spirits gathered around the altar and didn't escape the loop?

Who were the padre and the others praying to, and who bestowed their power…

As Lumian considered this, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his lower body.

He instinctively curled up, but the ropes binding him prevented the motion.

Pons Bénet pulled his foot back from between Lumian's legs, smirking as beads of cold sweat formed on the young man's forehead. Lumian couldn't even make a sound.

He squatted down, raised his right hand, and slapped Lumian.

"Did you enjoy zat? Tell me, did you enjoy it?"

Without waiting for Lumian's response, he swung his arm and slapped the right side of his face, causing his ears to ring. Lumian felt like his head might fly off.

Seeing Lumian being beaten by Pons Bénet, Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, approached and squatted down. He sighed and said, "Bear with it. Just endure it for a while. Our fortunes are about to change. Good luck is on its way. If you leave now, you'll miss the opportunity!"

Ignoring Lumian's reaction, he repeated the same words, trying to persuade and console him.

Lumian paid no attention to Pierre Greg. He gazed at Pons Bénet without anger, as if he were looking at empty air.

He completely disregarded him, ignoring the pain and humiliation this villain had inflicted upon him.

Only one thought occupied his mind:

The situation is dire!

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine are unlikely to trigger the loop and restart everything prematurely before confirming the padre's intentions. Besides, they just fought; who knows when they'll recover. They probably won't sneak back to the village until tomorrow or the day after.

This way, no one can stop the padre from conducting the ritual in advance tonight…

Slap, slap, slap. Pons Bénet continued slapping Lumian's face and kicking his lower body, intensifying the pain he endured.

Lumian's thoughts were repeatedly interrupted by pain as he stubbornly tried to focus, refusing to waste even a second on Pons Bénet.

This only infuriated Pons Bénet further, causing him to strike even harder.

My specialness has already been discovered and targeted. They won't give me a chance to disrupt the ritual…

What should I do…

What can I do?

Lumian endured the pain and searched for a way to escape his current predicament.

Pons grew tired from beating him up. He stopped and panted.

“If ze padre hadn’t forbidden me from killing you, I would’ve sliced off your flesh piece by piece, including what’s down below!”

...

Hearing this, Lumian was taken aback as an idea flashed through his mind.

Kill me?

Kill me!

He suddenly raised his head and glared at Pons Bénet, his face contorted into a twisted smile born of pain.

“Is that all you’ve got? Are you using that pathetic little knife of yours to pick lice for me?”

He fully embraced his role as a Sequence 8 Provoker.

…

In the alpine meadow nearest to Cordu.

Ryan, clad in tattered armor, stood guard at the entrance and asked Valentine and Leah, “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” Valentine responded immediately.

Leah added, “My spirituality has almost recovered.”

...

Ryan nodded and dissolved the Dawn Armor.

“After I rest and recover a bit, we’ll return to Cordu.”

“Now?” Leah sounded surprised.

They hadn’t been gone from Cordu for long.

Ryan exhaled slowly and said, “We need to find out as soon as possible why Guillaume Bénet’s group attacked us tonight and not on the twelfth night. Besides, they captured Lumian and Aurore, but they didn’t pursue us. Experience tell me

that something's off."

Leah nodded slowly. "But we're not in the best shape."

After all, they had just fought a massive battle.

"That's why Guillaume Bénet doesn't expect us to return to Cordu tonight," Ryan explained. "Also, we left that item at Lumian and Aurore's house. We have to retrieve it as soon as possible. We can't let Guillaume Bénet and the others get their hands on it."

Valentine and Leah's expressions turned grave at the mention of that item.

They agreed to Ryan's plan.

…

Pa!

Pons Bénet slapped Lumian's face again, making his nose throb. Two streams of bright red blood flowed down to his mouth, bringing with them a foul and salty taste.

"How about zis?" Pons Bénet asked with a smile.

Lumian studied his expression and actions, realizing that his words hadn't had the desired effect.

He sniffed his blood-filled nose and replied with a smile, "Any other woman could hurt me more than you!"

"Is zat so?" Pons Bénet's expression darkened.

With a slap, he struck Lumian's mouth, sending two of his teeth flying with blood.

Relying on Provoker's insight and his experience at pranking, Lumian acutely sensed that Pons Bénet's reaction was different this time.

Familiar with all sorts of scandals and rumors in Cordu, Lumian vaguely thought of something and grinned.

"You don't seem to have a mistress."

His mouth was swollen from the slap, and two of his teeth were missing. His words came out slightly muffled.

Hearing the word "mistress," Pons Bénet's expression shifted subtly as he kicked Lumian's groin.

Lumian nearly blacked out from the pain. He couldn't speak for a few seconds.

Forcing a smile, he said with a boisterous laugh, “And the padre’s mistresses are all over the village. Can’t get it up?”

Pons Bénet’s expression instantly darkened.

Lumian knew he had guessed right.

He endured the pain, his eyes narrowing.

He hadn’t dared use Provocation earlier, fearing that he would be discovered if he used it too often. Now was the time!

Lumian laughed out loud.

“Did the padre sleep with your wife too? Are all your children his?”

Pons Bénet’s eyes turned bloodshot.

He suddenly reached out and grabbed Lumian’s neck, yelling with all his might, “Why don’t you just die!”

Lumian heard a cracking sound from his neck and found it difficult to breathe.

Yet, he wasn’t afraid. Instead, the corners of his mouth curled up as he calmly awaited the excruciating pain and inevitable death.

He had done his best to enrage Pons Bénet so that he would kill him.

Once he died, the loop would be triggered, and everything would restart immediately. Everything would return to the beginning, leaving room for recovery!

Not only had Lumian considered provoking Valentine to commit suicide to verify the nature of the loop, but he had also thought of sacrificing his own life in an emergency!

Compared to the current situation, what was there to fear?

He gazed at Pons Bénet, whose expression was vicious, and his purple lips quivered as if to say: “Please, kill me quickly.”

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Chapter 105 - 105 That Person

105 That Person

Pons Bénet's grip tightened relentlessly, his eyes bloodshot and bulging.

If it hadn't been for the fact that Lumian couldn't speak or that his vision had started to fade to black, he would have thanked him.

Suddenly, a hand appeared from nowhere, grasping Pons Bénet's hair at the back of his head, trying to forcibly pry him off Lumian.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill him? Have you lost your damn mind?"

Pierre Berry growled in a deep voice as he intervened, stopping Pons Bénet.

But Pons Bénet wouldn't listen. His crimson eyes locked onto Lumian, his mind consumed by fury and murderous intent. All he could think of was killing this bastard.

Whack!

Pierre Berry swung his right leg up, striking Pons Bénet's groin with his brand-new leather shoe.

Pons Bénet reflexively let go, clutching his crotch, squeezing his thighs together, and collapsing to the ground.

He whimpered involuntarily, his face contorted in agony, like a rooster being strangled by the neck.

Pierre Berry glanced at him coolly and said, "Once you've recovered, bring Lumian to the altar. The ritual is about to begin."

He shifted his gaze, bending down to assess Lumian's condition.

As Lumian's senses returned and he slowly opened his eyes, he straightened up and nodded.

His darkening vision restored to clarity, the pain in his neck became more apparent. Lumian was disheartened to find that his view was not of the familiar ceiling of his bedroom but of Pierre Berry's bloodied face.

Am I still alive? He wondered subconsciously as he turned his head and spotted Pons Bénet curled up on the ground.

“Pathetic!” Lumian spat contemptuously. “If you can’t satisfy women and can’t even kill a man, what’s the point of living?”

Pons Bénet felt a wave of rage surge through his head. If it weren’t for the lingering pain in his groin and Pierre Berry’s watchful eye, he would have snapped once more.

…

Lumian and Aurore’s house lay in ruins, more than half its roof missing.

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine crept back under the moon and starlight.

Once they confirmed the area was clear, Ryan turned to Leah and said, “Tonight’s situation is worse than we thought. Perform divination.”

As they traveled from Cordu Village to Lumian’s house, they noticed that every house was empty. They had no idea where everyone had gone.

This was a shocking anomaly!

“Alright.” Leah nodded.

Before she could take out a pen and paper to write a divination statement, Ryan reminded her, “Be cautious. Choose the direction of the divination carefully. Don’t attempt it if it feels too risky.”

“Understood.” Leah was well-versed in this area. She knew that Cordu was a place filled with danger and abnormalities. A minor error in the divination direction could lead to severe injuries or loss of control.

After a few moments of contemplation, she entered Aurore’s bedroom, which now lacked a wall along the corridor, and found a manuscript to use as a medium.

As Leah wrote the divination statement, Ryan and Valentine entered Lumian’s room where they had been sleeping.

Ryan’s brownish-yellow suitcase sat beside the desk near the window, concealed by the curtain.

Seeing that the item was still there, Ryan breathed a sigh of relief and said to Valentine, “Make the preparations.”

As he spoke, he pulled the suitcase out, placed it on the ground, and undid the brass-like metal buckle.

Valentine opened his arms slightly, and illusory golden flames emerged from the void, illuminating the room.

With Sunlight, Ryan finally dared to open his suitcase with a grave expression.

Inside, there were no clothes, books, or coins—just a strange, folded scarecrow lying quietly.

The scarecrow's eyes were covered with thick black cloth strips. Its face, neck, palms, feet, and calves were made of brownish-green straw, but its arms, chest, and thighs were covered in real, slightly pale-white skin.

This was a mystical item that the joint investigation team had acquired from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Riston diocese before their departure.

Teams at their level could request Sealed Artifacts to handle abnormalities.

Ryan closed his eyes, and information about the mystical item before him naturally surfaced in his mind.

"Number: 2

"Name: Tanago Scarecrow.

"Danger Grade: 2. Dangerous. Use with care and moderation. It can only be applied for operations that require three or more people. Security clearance requires a diocesan bishop.

"Security classification: Bishop, Team Captain, or above.

"Description: This scarecrow was first discovered in the Tanago region of Riston Province, near the remnants of a village annihilated by a cult's worship ritual.

"Two Purifiers, ten police officers, and 76 farmers vanished after passing by the farm where the scarecrow was placed, never to be seen again.

"Research suggests that those who enter a 30-meter radius of the scarecrow and lock eyes with it will lose self-awareness and be drawn towards it uncontrollably. Within moments, they disappear, leaving behind only their possessions and garments.

"At the zenith of sunlight, the scarecrow loses its power; touching it or meeting its gaze has no effect.

"A farmer from a neighboring village claims the scarecrow was once ordinary, indistinguishable from others until the village farmland it protected was decimated.

"With each disappearance, flesh and skin appear on a small portion of the scarecrow.

“Its ultimate transformation remains a mystery, but revival seems a likely outcome.

“The scarecrow already displays signs of life, moving at night and attempting to break free from its containment.

“Sealing Method: Blindfold it with a thick, black cloth and enclose it in a confined, dark space.

“Usage Process: Remove the scarecrow only under sunlight, and unbind the black cloth from its eyes.

“Appendix: 1. Avoid its gaze at all costs. Even under the protection of sunlight, you risk enduring lasting nightmares and mental debilitation.

“2. Limit interaction with the scarecrow to no more than two minutes per session. Excessive use intensifies its determination to escape and resist.

...

“3. Warning: Permanently seal the scarecrow before it acquires enough flesh.”

As Ryan and Valentine investigated the Sealed Artifact’s possible loss or escape, Leah entered a dream divination state.

Whispering the divination incantation to locate Aurore, she sat at her desk, reclined in her chair, closed her eyes, and quickly drifted into slumber.

Guided by her four silver bells, Leah glimpsed Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, in a surreal, distorted world. She recognized an altar, nearby villagers, and the distant stained glass and golden walls of a cathedral…

Leah’s eyes flew open, and she bolted from the room. Breathlessly, she informed Ryan and Valentine, “They’re all at the cathedral! Performing a ritual!”

…

Inside the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun.

Pons Bénet carried the disappointed Lumian toward the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips. Pierre Berry, keeping a watchful eye, accompanied them.

Glancing at his sister Aurore, her eyes vacant, Lumian turned to Pierre Berry and sneered.

“You’re nothing but a coward and a piece of trash!”

The shepherd shot him a glance but remained silent, his expression unchanging.

...

Undeterred, Lumian continued, grinning, “Your woman died of illness, yet you did nothing. You just put your faith in a malevolent god. Didn’t she die because the factory owner overworked her and paid her next to nothing? If I were you, I’d have hunted down that boss and hung his whole family from the factory chimney! But you didn’t! You were too scared. Scared you’d die too. Trash, coward!”

As Lumian studied Pierre Berry’s subtle reactions, he slyly added Provocation to his final words.

Pierre Berry’s expression contorted; his gentle gaze slowly morphed into a menacing glare, as if a hidden seal had been broken, unleashing the demon within.

Padre Guillaume Bénet, at the altar, barked sternly, “Control yourself!”

Pierre Berry shuddered and came to his senses.

In retaliation, he ripped a piece of cloth from his ragged attire, crumpled it into a ball, and shoved it into Lumian’s mouth.

F*ck! Lumian struggled fiercely, but to no avail.

He kept cursing and adding Provocation, but time was against him. His mouth was fully gagged by the cloth, and he could no longer speak.

Panic and despair welled up in Lumian’s heart, threatening to overwhelm him.

He desperately reined in his emotions, warding off any thoughts of surrender.

Carried to the altar, Lumian’s mind raced, searching for alternative ways to end his life.

Soon, he was presented before the padre, the massive black thorn symbol separating him from Aurore.

Guillaume Bénet motioned for Pierre Berry to help Lumian to his feet, then scrutinized the young man’s face and smiled.

“You’re tougher than I thought, but you’re still lacking. The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him, yet you have none. No one to teach you the ways of life.”

“The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him” was a popular saying in Intis. It referred to both a biological father and a societal father —often known as a godfather.

This was why the people of Intis often acknowledged godfathers and godmothers.

The padre taunted Lumian for being an orphan, with neither a godfather nor a father.

In response, Lumian wished he could retort, mocking the padre about his own child having three, no, four fathers—the padre himself, his godfather, his mother's lover… If the gag hadn't held tight, Lumian would definitely have taunted the padre enough to make him lose his mind, killing him on the spot.

Unfortunately, he couldn't say anything.

"Should we begin the ritual now?" Pierre Berry inquired of Guillaume Bénet.

The padre shook his head.

"Let's wait a bit longer."

"What for?" Pierre Berry asked, puzzled.

The padre offered no answer, but Lumian was already devising a new suicide plan.

Suddenly, inspiration struck.

Enter a deep Cogitation state and submit to the scrutiny of the two entities. Eagerly, he sought the enigmatic and horrifying voice, hoping to provoke his own breakdown and loss of control.

Lumian glanced at Aurore, her face blank and her eyes empty, but otherwise unchanged. He closed his eyes.

First, he envisioned the crimson sun. Once calm, he transformed it into the orb adorned with eyes and a cross.

Silently, Lumian "saw" the faint gray fog once more. He "saw" the chaos of overlapping colors and indescribable, non-existent things.

Yet this time, he didn't sense the gaze of an entity lurking within the fog or looming high above.

Why is it different? Lumian's eyes snapped open in surprise.

Just then, a figure entered through the cathedral doors.

Clad in a black robe and a wide hood, the man's face was obscured by shadows. He stood tall, around 1.8 meters in height.

As the mysterious figure approached the altar, the padre stepped aside deferentially, his demeanor humble and reverent.

Who is that? The one behind the padre? Lumian puzzled, peering closer.

The more he studied the man, the more familiar he seemed, as though Lumian had encountered him before.

Suddenly, it clicked.

This was the figure lurking in the corner of the Warlock's tomb!

The black-robed man ascended the altar and stood before Lumian. Leaning forward slightly, he stifled a chuckle.

"Did you realize that Cogitation is useless?"

What? How does he know? Lumian stared at him, shocked and bewildered.

At this proximity, even with the hood concealing his features, Lumian could discern the black-robed man's face.

He was a young man in his late teens, his limbs long and lean, his hair short and jet-black, his eyes a light blue, and his features sharply chiseled. He was strikingly handsome.

What… Lumian's gaze locked onto the man.

He knew this face all too well. He saw it every day when he looked in the mirror.

It was himself!

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Chapter 106 - 106 The Ritual Begins

106 The Ritual Begins

Lumian noticed that the black-robed man's face was nearly identical to his own, save for a few subtle differences.

The depths of the stranger's light-blue eyes held a faint silver-black hue. It was unclear whether the shadow of the hood affected the man's complexion or if his skin was naturally a shade darker.

"Who are you?!" Lumian blurted out in shock, his words muffled by the cloth in his mouth, leaving only indistinct movements.

The black-robed man smiled without introducing himself, turning and walking towards the padre.

Lumian strained to follow, desperate to learn the man's identity, his purpose, and why he had appeared in the dead Warlock's tomb.

This was crucial to him.

Although the padre's ability to retain memories within the loop was surprising, it wasn't inexplicable. Lumian's theories about the nature of the loop could account for such an anomaly. After all, Madame Pualis was a prime example.

However, the black-robed man's sudden appearance was entirely unexpected. It wasn't his presence that was startling; Lumian had always suspected another individual, apart from the owl and the occupant of the coffin, to be the mastermind behind Cordu's abnormalities.

What truly shocked him was the striking resemblance between the black-robed man and himself. It suggested the man could be another version of Lumian.

His theories about the loop's nature failed to explain this baffling revelation!

Something's not right! Lumian struggled to lean forward, but the ropes held him fast, causing him to crash onto the altar with a thud.

His nose, which had ceased bleeding, began to flow anew, and the red, swollen wounds grew more prominent.

Undeterred, Lumian pressed on. Unable to use his limbs, he relied on Dancer's incredible flexibility, slithering towards the black-robed man with great difficulty.

His mind raced with thoughts.

I have to find out who this black-robed man is and why he's here!

This must be a manifestation of the loop's essence. Unraveling this secret could provide hope of using the loop to escape the current predicament and ultimately resolve the anomalies plaguing Cordu!

Drip, drip. Blood from Lumian's face stained the ground a vibrant red. His body smeared the crimson hue in all directions as he writhed in his struggle. The scene was chaotic and reeked of blood.

He strained to reach the black-robed man, but couldn't utter a sound. His face, contorted by pain and anxiety, was a horrifying sight.

The black-robed man, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Lumian, glanced down and instructed the padre, Guillaume Bénet, "Begin the ritual."

"Alright," Guillaume Bénet told Pierre Berry at the edge of the altar. "Bring Lumian to the altar."

Pierre Berry strode over, gripped Lumian under his arm, and hoisted him up.

No! Lumian thrashed with all his might, like a fish freshly yanked from the water.

Pierre Berry nearly lost his grip due to Lumian's "slipperiness."

The gentleness in Pierre's eyes quickly vanished, replaced by a ferocious and brutal glint.

His strength surged as he forcefully restrained Lumian and flung him onto the altar.

Afterward, Pierre Berry glanced at Lumian and chuckled.

"You better hope you die during the ritual rather than live through it. You'll regret it, I promise."

Is this a response to my earlier Provocation? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he saw Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, approach his side.

She leaned against the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips, her gaze vacant as she stared at her brother.

The cathedral's villagers swarmed forward, forming a semi-circle around the altar.

The padre retrieved two grayish-white candles, positioning them at the corresponding locations of Aurore and Lumian.

Next, he placed a candle beneath his feet, creating a pattern on the altar with two candles above and one below.

After a few moments, the padre ignited the three candles in sequence, from top to bottom and left to right, using his spirituality.

A faint sweetness wafted into Lumian's nostrils, leaving him disoriented. The scene felt inexplicably familiar.

…

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine stealthily approached the side of the Eternal Blazing Sun Cathedral, clutching a brownish-yellow suitcase.

Hidden in the shadows, they peered through the stained glass to see the Eternal Blazing Sun's altar transformed. They spotted Lumian bound on the left and Aurore standing on the right. They saw the padre facing the siblings, a lit grayish-white candle beneath his feet, flanked by the enigmatic black-robed man and Pierre Berry.

Valentine's fists clenched as a golden light flickered in his eyes.

Leah cast a sidelong glance at him, concerned her companion might be consumed by rage.

Fortunately, Valentine was a seasoned Purifier who had completed numerous missions. He understood what needed to be done and what to avoid.

Ryan averted his gaze and lowered his voice. "We'll move closer to the altar, shatter the glass, and launch a surprise attack. Our goal is to grab Lumian and Aurore and be out of the village within a minute.

"If we don't achieve our objective in that time, abort the mission and flee to the river. Trigger the loop proactively."

"Alright," Valentine and Leah murmured in hushed tones, each nodding in agreement.

Ryan added, "Valentine, ready Sunlight. We can't hold back any longer. We have to deploy 2-217 now."

"No problem," Valentine responded as Leah retrieved a box of matches.

She manipulated the silver bell on her veil and boots, sprinting around Cordu's square at breakneck speed while tossing matches at various points.

This marked a predetermined escape route.

Magicians didn't perform unprepared.

Once Leah had completed her task, the trio of official investigators cautiously circled beneath the stained glass to the side of the altar.

Valentine peered inside and told Ryan, “The ritual is about to commence. We must act now.”

Ryan, also observing the cathedral’s interior, furrowed his brow and asked, “Did you notice anything off?”

Leah hastily replayed the scene she had just witnessed in her mind, replying with apprehension, “I can’t hear anything from inside!”

They were a mere three meters from the closest villagers, yet they couldn’t discern any sound emanating from within. The villagers were clearly engaged in animated conversation!

Ryan’s eyes narrowed, and a suspicion instantly took shape in his mind.

...

He stood up and rammed into the stained-glass window before him, disregarding that the cultists inside the cathedral might discover his presence.

Clangs echoed as the delicate glass remained unbroken, but the villagers within the cathedral seemed oblivious to the chaos outside.

As Ryan summoned the Dawn Armor and Sword of Dawn, Leah sprinted in circles outside the window.

This time, not a single deliberately uncontrolled silver bell jingled.

From Leah’s perspective, this implied there was no danger; yet, how could there be no threat emanating from the cathedral?

Thus, she concluded that the correct answer was: The situation was extremely dangerous!

It was so dangerous that the silver bell Sealed Artifacts were utterly disrupted or dared not react!

Bang!

The Sword of Dawn, forged from light, struck a pane of stained glass but failed to have any impact. It seemed as if the entire cathedral was shrouded by an invisible, terrifying force that barred outsiders from entry.

A brilliant pillar of light, encircled by flames, descended from the sky as Valentine spread his arms. However, it didn’t appear inside the cathedral as he had anticipated. Instead, it landed outside the stained glass, causing ripples.

It appeared that the interior and exterior were entirely isolated.

...

Ryan made a quick decision and said to Valentine and Leah, “Let’s try the Sealed Artifact. If it doesn’t work, we’ll leave the village to trigger the loop.”

Ryan didn’t suggest immediate retreat because he hoped to barge in and save Lumian and Aurore. He suspected that once the ritual truly began, the loop might be affected. In that case, they wouldn’t be able to leave Cordu or restart everything there.

Wasting no time, Valentine summoned the illusory golden flames.

With two pops, Ryan opened the suitcase and retrieved the Tanago Scarecrow, its skin already half-covered.

He pressed the Scarecrow’s front against the stained glass and untied the thick black cloth.

A pair of human-like eyes appeared on 2-217’s face, devoid of emotion and embedded within the brownish-green straw.

The eyes swiveled and locked onto Pons Bénet, standing at the edge of the altar.

The villain froze, then bolted toward the window.

As he ran, his body vanished, leaving his clothes to flutter to the ground and cover his leather shoes.

A piece of skin-covered flesh emerged on the Tanago Scarecrow’s neck, fusing with the stalk below.

“It works!” Ryan and the others exclaimed, elated.

This meant that breaking into the cathedral wasn’t impossible, and the altar’s protection was not impregnable!

…

“The horoscope is about to change!”

“It’s finally happening!”

“…”

Amidst the villagers’ uproar and the surrounding scent of gray amber, cloves, musk, and tulips, Lumian experienced an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Relying on Dancer’s flexibility, he forced his upper body up despite being bound.

The next second, he saw the padre open his mouth and shout in ancient Hermes, “The mighty Circle of Inevitability!”

As soon as the words left his lips, darkness enveloped the cathedral’s interior, and the villagers fell silent.

The orange flames on the three candles were reduced to the size of pepper granules, now tainted silver and black.

Lumian’s mind buzzed as the familiar burning sensation ignited in his chest.

His vision blurred, and the vacant-eyed Aurore, the solemn-looking padre, and the hooded black-robed man appeared before him in layers beneath the dazzling gold dome.

A sharp pain stabbed at his head, as if something was being yanked from the depths of his memory. It felt eerily similar to the scene unfolding before him.

The sense of familiarity and déjà vu surged within Lumian’s heart, dozens or even hundreds of times stronger than before.

Thump, thump!

He could hear his heart pounding.

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Chapter 107 - 107 Shattering

107 Shattering

Thump, thump!

Lumian felt his heartbeat pounding, as images were painstakingly dragged from the depths of his memories.

His head threatened to split open. He fought against it, unwilling to continue.

Outside the stained glass, Ryan observed the ritual beginning. He tossed the Tanago Scarecrow to Leah without hesitation, signaling her to use the Sealed Artifact against the padre. He hefted the Sword of Dawn.

Beneath the golden flames, Leah and Valentine moved to another stained glass window, a half-exposed cylindrical wall separating them from Ryan.

They did this to evade the damage from the Hurricane of Light without hindering their movements. With the cathedral's "defensive capability," they believed a barrier between them would suffice. After all, Ryan would do his best to control the attack's direction.

Leah embraced the Tanago Scarecrow from behind, pressing it against the stained glass depicting St. Sith's sermon. She aimed at the altar and Guillaume Bénet, the padre leading the ritual.

On the other side, Ryan gripped the handle with both hands, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the windowsill.

The two-handed broadsword, forged from pure light, shattered and transformed into a whirlwind of razor-sharp fragments and specks of light.

The Hurricane exploded and slammed into the stained glass before him.

With a cracking sound, the entire cathedral trembled. Hairline fractures spider-webbed across the glass surface.

But it held fast.

Seeing this, Ryan summoned the minuscule particles of Sunrise Gleam, forging a massive two-handed axe.

Unable to use Hurricane of Light for now, he switched weapons.

Leah and Valentine, shielded by the protruding wall, dodged the Hurricane of Light's remnants. At that moment, the Tanago Scarecrow's gaze locked onto the priest. Its eyes, set in the brownish-green straw, reflected the white-robed figure with golden threads.

Leah noticed a faint silver light tinged with black materialize around the altar where Guillaume Bénet stood.

With a snap, the Tanago Scarecrow's eyes burst open, weeping blood-red tears.

The padre glanced over before looking away.

As two sheep "willingly" entered the altar, he intoned the incantation with calm fanaticism.

"You are the eternal cycle, the predestined destiny, the cause, the effect, and the process!"

Suddenly, the two deity-representing candles on the altar elongated to the size of a human head.

A howling wind swept through the cathedral, turning the villagers to statues. But silver-black warts emerged from their exposed faces and hands.

The silver-black light enveloping the altar rapidly spread, engulfing the entire cathedral.

The mural-filled dome became transparent. Clouds dispersed, and the crimson moon darkened to the shade of blood.

The stars on the black velvet backdrop flickered into existence, one by one, glowing with the intensity of the sun.

In an instant, night became day. The villagers stirred and murmured dreamily.

"The horoscope has changed…"

"Fortune is here…"

With three thuds, Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who hadn't heard but had witnessed the scene, crumpled to the ground. They writhed, wailed, and screamed in agony.

Ryan's skin turned grayish-blue, Leah's face appeared to teem with maggots and pulsing tendrils, and Valentine radiated a sun-like glow, from inside to out, from top to bottom.

They were on the brink of losing control.

The Tanago Scarecrow lay cast aside, trembling violently.

Lumian felt his chest burn as the terrifying voice, seemingly originating from an infinite distance and yet right beside him, echoed in his ears.

Invisible steel drills penetrated his skull, stirring his brain. Blood vessels bulged in pain, and silvery-black spots emerged beneath his skin.

An unseen force enveloped him, lifting him from the altar.

The ropes binding him and the cloth gagging him crumbled to dust and dispersed in the air.

Aurore, too, was hoisted by this invisible force, floating above the altar and facing Lumian.

His bloodshot eyes mirrored his sister's long blonde hair, vacant light-blue eyes, pristine and emotionless face, and the simple yet odd white robe she wore.

He recoiled, sensing a familiar déjà vu from the depths of his memories. The pain was as intense as the madness.

The surrounding scenes melded together in Lumian's mind:

The padre's solemn and fanatical expression;

The black-robed man advancing toward the altar;

Pierre Berry prostrate on the ground;

The transparent cathedral dome;

The crimson moon and constellations in the sky;

The villagers with stiff expressions, welcoming their fortune;

Aurore, her face contorted with pain…

Lumian's head spun as his body was torn apart by an invisible force, silver-black spots multiplying on his skin.

He was powerless to break free or resist effectively.

"Ah!"

Lumian screamed involuntarily as his chest was gradually pried open, casting a silvery-black light onto Aurore.

Aurore's eyes darted around, hearing the agonized cry.

Her empty gaze mirrored Lumian's swollen blood vessels, his twisted face with silver-black hues beneath the surface.

After a momentary pause, she instinctively reached out and pushed Lumian away from danger.

...

Grande Soeur… Lumian stared, dumbfounded, as Aurore shoved him out of the altar's reach.

Suddenly, the dreadful sound in his ears vanished, and the invisible restraints on his body disappeared. The burning sensation across his skin subsided.

Yet the pain in his head remained unchanged. Deep-rooted memories were forcibly dredged up.

It was as if someone had used a hook to slowly extract his brain from his skull.

Aurore's light-blue eyes tainted with silver-black, her blank stare, her lifeless face, and her resolute, forceful actions pushing him away flashed in Lumian's mind. It was nearly identical to what he'd witnessed moments ago, but the black-robed man was missing from the background.

This amplified déjà vu led Lumian to instinctively question if something similar had happened before. He screamed in pain once more.

Bam! He plummeted to the ground after leaving the altar.

Ignoring the excruciating pain in his head and his disorientation, Lumian sprang up, prepared to seize Aurore and flee the altar with his sister.

A figure obstructed his path. The black-robed man wearing his face struck him on the right cheek, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Lumian refused to give in. With desperate courage, he rose again and lunged at the black-robed man blocking his way.

Whack!

...

The black-robed man swung his fist, and Lumian instinctively evaded.

He stood stunned for a moment before a twisted smile crept across his face. He snarled, "Why are you so damn weak? As weak as me!"

Lumian dismissed thoughts of the padre and Pierre Berry as he lunged at the black-robed man.

The man sidestepped, raising his right foot to trip Lumian's calf. Lumian didn't evade. With the terrifying flexibility of a dancer, he forced a half-turn and extended his arm to grapple his foe.

Thud! He tumbled to the ground, taking the black-robed man down with him.

The man nimbly raised his right hand, gripping Lumian's throat and delivering a brutal knee to his groin.

Lumian didn't flinch. Bloodshot eyes locked on his opponent, he clawed at the man's eyes with his right hand.

"Ah!"

The black-robed man screamed as Lumian tore out his eyeballs, blood spurting forth. Lumian instinctively curled up, nearly passing out from the agony in his lower body.

Struggling to his feet, he shot the writhing man on the ground a sinister grin.

"Come on! Let's die together! You coward! Coward!"

He lunged once more, encircling the man's neck with his arms.

At that moment, Pierre Berry, at the edge of the altar, staggered to his feet. Brandishing his axe, he sprinted to Lumian's side.

Whack!

His axe descended, only to be halted by a faint gray mist that had materialized. It failed to harm Lumian.

Pierre Berry employed two different abilities, but couldn't penetrate the gray fog's defense.

Guillaume Bénet, the priest, didn't hesitate and began reciting a prayer.

"I implore you,

"I beseech your benediction.

"I plead with you to grant me…"

Before he could finish, the scene transformed.

The constellations in the sky shifted incrementally, deviating from their original positions.

Cordu trembled violently as every house and inch of soil surged toward the cathedral.

Silently, the villagers decomposed into organs. Eyeballs, mouths, noses, hearts, fingers, and flesh…

A scant few reassembled into different people. Some appeared normal, others malformed, some missing parts, and some with extra appendages.

The majority hurtled toward the altar and Aurore.

Cracks spread across Aurore's body, and she swiftly disintegrated into countless pieces of flesh.

Witnessing this, Lumian spiraled into despair.

Still, he refused to surrender. Seizing the black-robed man's head, he twisted it violently, snapping his neck under the man's horrified gaze.

Lumian rose and raced toward his sister.

But an invisible barrier surrounding Aurore obstructed his path.

Rumble!

With a muffled thud, the cathedral began to ascend. Trees, soil, and boulders from outside the village soared, accompanied by houses, furniture, and miscellaneous items.

The organs of most villagers merged with Aurore's flesh at the altar, contorting and writhing before morphing into a colossal being.

The giant stood four to five meters tall, boasting three heads and six arms. Its entire form was composed of flesh and organ fragments, its body riddled with cracks oozing yellow pus.

The central head of the giant, filled with pain and regret, strained to gaze at Lumian.

Transparent, blood-hued tears trickled from the corners of "his" eyes.

Witnessing this, Lumian's mind reeled as if cleaved by an axe.

His vision wavered as he "saw" the shattered cathedral, the steadily rising blood-red "peak," the thorny "city wall" formed by distorted houses, the encircling ruins around the "peak," and the various monsters forced to flee the area…

What… Lumian's head throbbed with pain again.

As he watched countless tiny beams of light shoot from the giant and surrounding monsters, landing on his chest, he realized that the scenes buried deep in his memories had been entirely unearthed. They were nearly identical to what he saw now.

This is… Lumian abruptly had a hunch, and his headache worsened.

Suddenly, everything before him turned eerily illusory, with pronounced cracks appearing like broken glass.

This is! Lumian finally recalled something.

Then, he saw the black-robed man transform into a pitch-black, repulsive liquid that soared before him and seeped into his left chest.

“Ah!”

Lumian screamed in agony as his surroundings crumbled.

He snapped his eyes open and found himself lying beneath the blood-red mountain peak. The encroaching darkness, signaling the onset of night, had nearly vanished.

Lumian instinctively sat up, leaning forward. He placed his hands on the ground and scanned his surroundings.

He saw a twisted, thorny “wall,” a barren landscape devoid of vegetation, and the dream ruins beyond. He spotted Ryan, Leah, and Valentine lying at the edge of a room not far away.

They were sound asleep.

Lumian abruptly bowed his head, raised his hands, grasped his hair, and whispered in anguish, “Is reality a dream, and the dream reality? Is this the present or the past? Aurore. Is Aurore beyond saving?”

“Yes.” A woman’s voice echoed in the ruins.

Lumian looked up, bewildered, and faintly saw the enigmatic woman appear before him.

She approached, wearing the orange dress she’d donned at the beginning.

“That’s why you were so desperate to obtain superpowers in your dream, regardless of the consequences. That’s why you disregarded others’ lives and even your own. You wanted to resolve the loop embodying the concept of a ‘problem’ as quickly as possible. That’s why you couldn’t control your instincts and uttered inappropriate words or performed inappropriate actions on certain occasions…”

Lumian gazed at the mysterious woman, dazed, realizing that the indescribable and inexplicable emotion in her eyes had resurfaced.

This time, he could finally decipher it.

It was pity.

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Chapter 108 - 108 Report

108 Report

Several days later, an investigation report on Cordu Village was submitted to Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee's Bureau 8, the Machinery Hivemind of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, and the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition.

Upon receipt, the brass immediately reviewed the report.

Background: Over the past year, numerous disappearances have occurred in the Feynapotter Kingdom's Grabaka Province, near the Dariège region, and in the Lenburg Republic's Upper Hel state. Several Beyonders without official permission have mysteriously vanished, and these incidents seem to be connected to shepherds traveling across the three regions. Among them, those from Cordu Village became our primary focus.

Consequently, after receiving an unusual distress letter, we prioritized the mobilization of elite personnel and dispatched them as a joint investigation team.

The investigators' complete written statements are as follows:

The anomaly in Cordu Village can be categorized into two levels: reality and dreamscape.

Reality:

Cordu was ultimately destroyed by a large-scale but unsuccessful evil god sacrificial ritual. Only a small number of villagers survived.

Most villagers were utilized as nutrients for the failed creation of an evil god. The remaining individuals were reassembled in peculiar ways and transformed into various monsters.

The evil god sacrificial ritual altered the landscape. The river dried up and changed course. The village square and cathedral were elevated nearly 40 meters by a small-scale orogeny, forming a blood-colored pillar.

The failed evil god creation was located atop the pillar. However, when we discovered it, it had already been destroyed, potentially by self-destruction or interference from other factions.

Cordu's houses also underwent reassembly. Some formed a twisted, thorny city wall around the blood-colored pillar, while others were arranged in circular

patterns…

In these severely damaged buildings, we found only a few coins and the most common livre bleu. We did not find any written information or anything that could clearly identify Cordu. The reason remains unknown.

Only the house of Lumian Lee—the target—contained books, newspapers, magazines, and other items that clearly identified it.

Within the ruins of Cordu, there are two abnormal areas surrounding the blood-colored pillar. One can induce a deep slumber, leading to a dreamscape, while the other is teeming with life, filled with flowers and trees, and features a self-rocking crib.

Our assumption regarding the latter area is that it is closely related to Madame Pualis of Cordu. (For a detailed explanation, refer to the Dreamscape section.)

At the other edge of the blood-colored pillar, we unearthed four relatively well-preserved corpses. The location likely corresponds to the original cathedral cemetery.

The first corpse was a woman, no more than twenty years old, who had been strangled to death.

The second corpse was a young man, also no more than twenty years old, who had drowned.

The third corpse was surrounded by coffin fragments. Female, over 60 years old, and died of mechanical asphyxiation. Based on other evidence, we speculate that she was suffocated with a pillow.

The fourth corpse was male and had not decomposed. His tongue had been severed while he was alive, and there were visible ligature marks on his neck.

Relevant speculations about the aforementioned corpses can be found in the Dreamscape section.

…

Upon entering the ruins of Cordu, we were likely affected by the power emanating from Lumian Lee's body. Our memories of the date became disordered, and the thought of leaving ceased to occur to us.

One by one, we fell asleep. While in the dream state, our bodies maintained a weak level of activity, eliminating the need for food replenishment for several days. Had we remained in this state for another half a month, it is uncertain whether we would have awoken from hunger or perished within the dream.

The entire ruin is locked in a loop capable of reverting to its original state at any moment. The trigger point is most likely tied to Lumian Lee's self-awareness and the restrictions he imposes. The former refers to the inevitable restart if Lumian

Lee's subconscious anticipates it, while the latter stems from his desire to prevent anyone from disrupting Cordu's current state and the development of the dream. Any relevant event would immediately trigger a restart.

…

We inquired with villagers from surrounding areas, but they reported no abnormalities concerning Cordu.

Through their responses and previously gathered information, we confirmed three points:

First, there was never a legend of a deceased Warlock in Cordu (this refers to a story told by Lumian Lee in the dreamscape: Once, a Warlock lived in Cordu. After his death, an owl perched on his bed head for a time before flying away. The Warlock's corpse grew heavy, requiring nine bulls to transport it);

Second, no elves suspected of being in the form of lizards have appeared in the Dariège area.

Third, Lent is traditional folklore and had no issues originally.

…

Dreamscape:

The dreamscape originated from Lumian Lee and is so realistic that we couldn't discern that we were dreaming.

We consulted psychologists and dream experts and synthesized their opinions to form a hypothesis about this dream.

It is an amalgamation of Lumian Lee's personal experiences, all the novels he has read, and his assumptions and conjectures based on previous events. The dream exhibits obvious coincidences and characteristics of wish fulfillment at certain critical junctures.

Within this dreamscape, not all the situations we encountered were real, nor were they entirely fabricated.

Disorganized facts, the minutiae of daily interactions, and the illusory scenes that left a profound impact on Lumian Lee were reassembled in a chaotic and symbolic manner, presenting themselves to us.

This is both a characteristic of the dreamscape and a manifestation of Lumian Lee's subconscious avoidance or fear of certain issues.

Moving forward, we will provide a detailed account of every aspect of our experience:

…

We ought to have realized that we were in a dream earlier on. The most evident clue was that we did not recall needing to change our clothes until Lumian Lee reminded us that our garments were severely damaged.

Though this is quite unusual, humans tend not to think critically within dreams.

It has been confirmed that we did not send telegrams. The corresponding responses may have originated from Lumian Lee's subconscious and the knowledge he possesses.

By combining the events in the dream with the situation in reality, we have arrived at the following conjectures:

Our consciousness and knowledge, to some extent, enriched the dream, and we may have inadvertently exposed some of our secrets to Lumian Lee.

There are at least two distinct evil god faiths in Cordu. One represents a power akin to Earth Mother's, embodied by Administrator Béost's wife, Madame Pualis. The other is the one followed by Guillaume Bénet, the former padre, and the majority of the villagers. The latter faith ultimately led to Cordu's destruction.

During the Lent celebration, the Spring Elf's beheading and send-off symbolized driving the force representing Madame Pualis out of Cordu. There may have been a violent conflict between the two factions. Simultaneously, the decapitation of Ava Lizier, the personification of the Spring Elf, symbolized that this girl had discovered something amiss in reality. When she attempted to escape or inform others, she was clandestinely strangled to death by Guillaume Bénet's group.

Reimund Greg was thrown into the river. The appearance of his Spirit Body beneath the cathedral symbolizes that, like Ava, he was deemed a snitch and subsequently drowned.

Jean Maury discovered that his wife, Sybil, had an affair with the former padre. In a fit of rage, he became mute. This symbolized that as a devout follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, his tongue was cut off when he tried to inform others about the village's abnormalities. His subsequent disappearance implied that he had been murdered.

Naroka's death shares the same potent symbolism as Ava, Reimund, and Jean. First, she must have covertly followed Madame Pualis, intending to allow her deceased husband's spirit to return home through the aid of the soul messenger. Thus, her post-death behavior was to enter Paramita. Second, it is highly likely that she was killed by her youngest son, Arnault André, likely because she had discovered the issue with Guillaume Bénet's group and wanted to inform Madame Pualis.

Based on our search of the ruins, the Lent celebration, and Madame Pualis's claim that she could depart at a specific moment, it is implied that she, her husband Béost, butler Louis Lund, and lady's maid Cathy left Cordu before the ritual on the twelfth night. They remain alive, and their whereabouts are unknown.

This is reflected in the dream by the lady's refusal to assist at critical moments.

...

However, considering the circumstances in the peculiar area teeming with vitality, we suspect that Madame Pualis left something behind before her departure and indirectly participated in the ritual on the twelfth night.

The black-robed man in the Warlock's tomb likely symbolizes Lumian Lee's mutated persona due to his corruption. However, for some reason, Lumian Lee did not appear to be deeply corrupted, enabling him to easily triumph during the skirmish, given his increased courage…

The bizarre lizard-like creature found in the mouths of Aurore Lee, Michel Garrigue, and others might symbolize their corruption and mutation, eventually transforming them into an alternate version of themselves.

…

Questions:

1. How is Lumian Lee aware of the abilities of Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and others? If he had secretly observed them in reality, it would be understandable if he remained undetected once or twice. There must be an inherent reason why he could obtain so much information without facing consequences.

2. Why did the villagers and Aurore Lee behave indistinguishably from real people, making it challenging for us to recognize that we were in a dream until Lumian Lee believed that something abnormal should have occurred to them?

3. What does Paramita symbolize?

4. What do Madame Pualis's numerous children in the castle and the crib with an invisible object represent?

5. Why did Lumian Lee use lizard-like elves to portray the villagers' corruption?

6. What do Lumian Lee and Aurore Lee's attempts to escape Cordu and enter Paramita signify?

...

7. Why did the ritual on the twelfth night fail?

8. How can Lumian Lee enable us to enter his dream? He evidently lacks the ability to do so.

9. Why did he suddenly acquire normal Beyonder powers?

10. How did he survive and cause the ruins of Cordu to enter a loop?

11. Aurore Lee's abnormalities occurred at entirely different times during the two cycles. What does this indicate?

12. What does the legend of the deceased Warlock symbolize?

13. What does the Warlock's corpse in the coffin in the underground tomb represent?

14. What does the owl symbolize?

15. What does the change in the horoscope signify?

16. What is the origin of the matter?

…

Conclusions and Recommendations:

This is a quintessential disaster resulting from the worship of an evil god. Currently, six known survivors exist:

Lumian Lee, former padre Guillaume Bénet, Pualis de Roquefort, Béost, Louis Lund, and Cathy.

The latter five are adherents of evil gods. We must locate and eliminate them as soon as possible.

Directly killing Lumian Lee is not advised. Until his issues are understood and resolved, his death might trigger an even more severe anomaly. The optimal solution is to capture and securely contain him.

Reporters: Ryan Vitia of Machinery Hivemind; Major Leah Bellot of Bureau 8; and Purifier Valentine de Lacourt of the Inquisition.

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Chapter 109 - 109 Minute Hope

109 Minute Hope

Days earlier, beneath the crimson “peak,” adjacent to the warped “city wall.”

Lumian knelt on the ground, gazing up at the enigmatic woman as she approached.

Her words echoed in his ears, only to gradually grow muffled.

Lumian’s hands pressed against the ground, clenching the soil as if attempting to crush it into liquid.

!!

As the mysterious woman halted about a meter away, he scrambled to his feet, anxiety gripping his voice, “Didn’t you say there’s still hope? Didn’t you claim Aurore and the others could be saved if I broke out of the loop myself?”

His voice grew hoarser with each word.

The enigmatic woman remained silent, her eyes filled with pity as she gazed at him.

Lumian hesitated before asking, hope lacing his words, “There’s still hope, right?

“That’s not just a fleeting dream. During my discussion with Aurore, she spoke of things I had never heard of—like how the description of an honorific name can hint at two separate entities!”

His eyes locked onto the woman, fear and hope battling as he scrutinized her every move.

At last, she nodded.

“There is indeed hope.”

Lumian’s eyes brightened, waiting for her to elaborate.

In a gentle voice, the woman explained, “In truth, Aurore has already died, but mystically, she’s not entirely gone.

“Do you recall the soft, faint sounds you hear from within your body each time you perform the Summoning Dance? Do you remember the light fragments from Aurore and the others that flew into your chest on the twelfth night ritual?”

“Are those their Spirit Bodies, their voices?” Lumian interrupted, eagerness filling his voice.

The woman responded, a mix of calm and pity, “They can only be considered soul fragments.

“At the end of the twelfth night, you became a conduit for the hidden entity to unleash its horrifying power. The surrounding believers, including the soul fragments of the sacrifice, were absorbed by you. Guillaume Bénet, who led the ritual, was the sole exception.

“Later, those soul fragments and the potent corruptive power were sealed in the left side of your chest by my lord.

“That’s why, as you became increasingly ‘awake’ in your dreams and sensed the date and loop more clearly, Aurore and the other villagers seem more and more lifelike. They even displayed a degree of self-awareness and cognition.

“To truly awaken from the dream and restrain the looping power consuming the ruins, you had to rely on yourself. You had to find the courage to confront the pain, face the truth, and chase after the elusive hope.

“If I were to resolve it, there’s only one option: to completely annihilate you and the ruins of Cordu. Otherwise, the corruption within you will seep out uncontrollably, and Aurore and the others will truly perish in the realm of mysticism.”

As the mysterious woman mentioned the twelfth-night ritual, Lumian couldn’t help but remember.

A sharp pain stabbed his head, and only a few images surfaced.

Aurore, with vacant eyes, shoved him away from the altar.

Beams of light burst from Aurore and the villagers, spiraling into the vortex on his chest.

Guillaume Bénet, the padre, revealed a shocked expression as he fled the altar.

Beyond that, Lumian couldn’t recall anything else. Only the events within the dream were clear, as if some force prevented him from remembering the rest.

His face contorted, his body trembling.

“I-I can’t remember much…”

The woman nodded.

“That’s normal. Firstly, it’s a subconscious self-protection to prevent an overload of painful memories and intense scenes from causing you to collapse and lose

control. Secondly, there are things you haven't witnessed and don't know the truth about. I don't know either.

"Yes, I'll need you to do something in Trier eventually. There are one, no, two exceptional psychologists I know there. I can arrange an appointment for you and see who's available to treat you. They can help you remember more and reconstruct the events in Cordu as much as possible."

Lumian's emotions roiled as he listened, but all he could muster was a soft, "Thank you…"

Fists clenched, he asked anxiously, "Then what can I do to bring Aurore and the others back?"

The woman sighed, admitting, "I don't know either."

Seeing Lumian's eyes darken, she added, "But you have to believe that true miracles exist in this world.

"And the great existence I mentioned earlier is synonymous with Miracle."

Despair and hope swelled in Lumian's heart.

Though he knew the mysterious woman before him was likely offering comfort and hope, he couldn't help but say, "You said that once I unlocked the secret of the dream, you'd tell me the honorific name of that great existence."

Her expression grew solemn, her tone serious.

"I'll tell you now. Remember it well.

"His honorific name is: The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck."

As she spoke, Lumian felt his consciousness slipping, as if he could see a thin gray fog and a looming castle above it.

A gaze weighed upon him.

Simultaneously, the entire village of Cordu shuddered as the thin fog engulfing the area receded rapidly.

By the time Lumian regained clarity, sunlight had already filtered through the sky, casting golden specks upon the crimson mountain peak and desolate earth.

Lumian recalled the three lines of the honorific name and his conversation with Aurore in his dream.

He winced, a bitter smile forming as he said, "I thought there'd be a description of the past, present, and future."

The enigmatic woman in the orange dress tersely acknowledged his remark.

“There should be another one in the future, but if I use a description other than the three lines to pray to Him now, I can’t guarantee the response will be from Him.

“You should know that such a situation is very dangerous.”

Silent for a few seconds, Lumian then asked, a glint of hope in his eyes, “If I work diligently for you, can I eventually summon that great being to resurrect Aurore?”

“That’s one way,” the woman said softly. “You can also explore other methods. I won’t stop you. I’m merely reminding you that many resurrection techniques have grave flaws.”

...

Lumian nodded, signaling his understanding.

He didn’t dare to inquire, yet couldn’t help but ask, “Is there a significant chance of resurrection?”

The enigmatic woman glanced at him and sighed.

“It’s very, very slim, but I know you’ll still pursue it.”

Lumian pressed his lips together, remaining silent.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to assure her he’d do everything in his power to find a way to bring Aurore back, but he feared that speaking would reveal the sorrow surging within his heart.

After a few seconds, he asked in a raspy voice, “What do you need me to do in Trier?”

“Join a covert organization and help me gather some intel,” the woman replied simply. “I’ll tell you how to contact them once you’re in Trier.”

She added, “Besides uncovering the truth from your memories, you can also look into the ‘survivors’ of this catastrophe.”

“Survivors?” Lumian’s eyes narrowed.

The woman nodded.

...

“Besides you, there are five others: Madame Pualis, Béost, Louis Lund, Cathy, who left Cordu before the twelfth night, and Guillaume Bénet, who was protected by the ritual as its host. They escaped before this place was completely destroyed.”

“The padre is still alive?” Lumian’s lips curled up.

The enigmatic lady locked eyes with him and said, “If my divination is accurate, they should be hiding somewhere in Trier.”

“Very good.” Lumian smiled, wiping the corners of his eyes.

The woman then looked at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who slept near the room’s edge on the thorny city wall, and asked Lumian, “What do you plan to do with them?

“If they leave alive, you’ll undoubtedly be hunted by Bureau 8, Machinery Hivemind, and the Inquisition.

“From now on, you can only hide. You’ll never live openly under the sun. You’ll be forever accompanied by darkness, filth, and danger.”

Lumian glanced at Ryan and the others, chuckling hoarsely.

“Will killing them bring Aurore back?”

The woman shook her head.

“No.”

Lumian scoffed, bowing his head with his eyes closed.

Soon, he looked up and asked, “What’s the name of the organization I’m about to join? How should I contact you once I’m in Trier?”

The woman sighed faintly.

“I’ll tell you when the time comes.

“I’ll give you my messenger’s summoning method and the corresponding medium later. Contact me through that.”

Lumian fell quiet for a moment before posing another question. “Did I possess the power to trap Cordu in a loop?”

“Strictly speaking, you didn’t. At least not before receiving the Circle Inhabitant boon,” the woman explained casually. “This place is corrupted by that hidden being everywhere, and the power level sealed in your left chest is quite high. Therefore, when your emotions fluctuate and you’re in a subconscious state, you can mobilize the corresponding specialness to reset this place.” She paused, adding, “However, you’ve always been physically in a loop.

“The corruption sealed within your body allows you to reset your form at 6 a.m. every day and return to 6 a.m. on the twelfth night. Only changes brought about by Beyonder characteristics and boons are retained.”

Is this the real reason why I recover every time I wake up from injuries in the ruins? No wonder I didn't starve to death… Lumian immediately understood.

He glanced at his body, a self-deprecating smile forming.

"It'll always be that day…"

That nightmarish day.

Without waiting for the woman's response, he looked up and asked, "How should I address you?"

She smiled, beginning to reply, "You can call me…"

Before she could finish, cards suddenly danced in the air.

Each card bore a unique pattern, fluttering towards Lumian.

Instinctively, Lumian extended his right hand, attempting to catch some of the cards.

At that moment, most of the cards vanished, leaving just one.

The card gently settled in Lumian's palm, face-up. It depicted a figure extending their scepter into the sky and pointing at the ground with their left hand.

Tarot card—Magician!

Lumian glanced up in shock, realizing the enigmatic woman had disappeared.

Should I call her Madam Magician? Lumian subconsciously flipped the tarot card in his hand, revealing rows of minute Intis script:

"The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician."

Lumian studied the words for a moment before tucking the tarot card away.

He glanced at Ryan and the others, then turned around and staggered away from the area.

As he walked, Lumian couldn't help but look back at the blood-stained mountain peak and the twisted, thorny city wall.

The Cordu in his memory had already morphed into this. It bore no resemblance to what it once was, but Lumian still tried his best to observe and search, hoping to overlap the scene in his mind with reality.

He wanted to take another look at the giant atop the mountain, but he knew that it would cause him grave harm.

Unwittingly, Lumian slowly circled the blood-stained mountain peak and thorny city wall, his gaze constantly scanning the distorted and chaotic objects.

He knew what he was looking for, and he knew he would never find it.

Just like that, Lumian arrived at the spot where the wooden wall had blocked him.

Most of the area had collapsed, revealing the garden behind it.

The garden was lush and vibrant, a stark contrast to the blood-stained "peak," the warped "city wall," and the ruins on the other side.

In the center was a brown wooden crib, reminiscent of the one Lumian had seen in Madame Pualis's castle.

He subconsciously leaned over and realized that there was a small human-shaped indentation on the slightly aged white cotton swaddling cloth in the crib. It was as if a baby had once lain here, but its whereabouts were now unknown.

What does this mean? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he felt the sunlight shining down from the sky grow much brighter.

He instinctively looked up and saw golden flames completely engulfing the mountaintop.

The three-headed, six-armed giant loomed in the inferno, seemingly melting.

Lumian stared blankly for a few seconds before suddenly raising his hands to shield his face.

The "sunlight" was too intense.

…

In the semi-subterranean two-story building at the edge of the ruins.

Lumian trudged to his sister's bedroom with the 237 verl d'or and 46 coppet he had collected. He grabbed a brown suitcase filled with clothes and memorabilia and pushed open the door.

He was here to say goodbye.

As soon as he stepped in and saw the desk with the manuscripts, his head throbbed as an image surfaced.

Aurore's eyes darted around, no longer vacant. She looked at Lumian, who had been pushed away, and said with difficulty,

"My notebook…"

Grande Soeur's witchcraft notebook? Is there important information in it? Lumian pressed his forehead, walked to the desk, and opened the drawer below.

Familiar dark notebooks greeted his eyes.

He suddenly remembered that Aurore had taught him a great deal of mysticism knowledge before Cordu was destroyed.

…

In Dariège, at the steam locomotive station.

The ticket agent eyed Lumian and asked, "Where are your identification documents?"

"I forgot," replied Lumian, clad in a linen shirt, a dark jacket, and a round-rimmed black hat, as he held a brown suitcase.

He then turned and walked away from the window.

A short man in a half-top hat and black suit approached Lumian, whispering, "Do you want to take the courier carriage? It's headed for Bigorre."

"Does it require identification?" Lumian inquired.

The short man chuckled, responding, "No need. Our business is about to be crushed by the steam locomotive. Why would we need identification documents?

"So, are you taking it or not? This is the last remnant of romance from the classical era!"

Lumian gave a slight nod and asked, "How much?"

The short man's enthusiasm flared.

"20 verl d'or to Bigorre, takes about a day. There are five stops in between. Each stop allows for a rest, changing carriage drivers and horses. Two of the stops also provide free food."

Without further questions, Lumian followed the short man to a deserted street nearby.

A large carriage drawn by four horses was parked at the roadside.

Upon boarding, Lumian discovered the interior was rather spacious. Like the public carriage, it had two rows separated by an aisle, as well as space for larger luggage.

He found a seat by the window, placed his suitcase down, and pulled out a book with a dark red cover.

As the horses neighed outside, Lumian flipped through the book, illuminated by sunlight streaming through the window.

Beside him sat a man in his thirties with a well-groomed mustache, brown hair, blue eyes, and smart attire.

He glanced at the book in Lumian's hand, asking with interest, "Eternal Love? Aurore Lee's book? The one featuring the female lead named Kingsley and the male lead named Ciel?"

"Yes." Lumian nodded.

The mustached man became chatty.

"This book is Aurore Lee's earliest work. The writing was quite amateurish, particularly the dialogue between characters. It doesn't sound like something people would say in real life at all. It's so emotional, it's uncomfortable."

"Indeed." Lumian nodded again.

He bowed his head and flipped to the last few pages of the book, his gaze resting on the relevant passage.

"On her deathbed, Kingsley clutched Ciel's outstretched hand and gazed at his anguished expression. She forced a smile and said with difficulty, 'Stupid, live well.'"

(End of Part 1—Nightmare)

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Chapter 110 - 110 Foreigner

110 Foreigner

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return—From the Bible, Genesis 3:

The imposing grayish-white city wall, rising to a height of three meters, loomed before Lumian, stretching as far as the eye could see.

A multitude of private carriages, four-seaters, open tops, tandems, and cargo carriers queued, awaiting entry through the city gate.

Blue-uniformed tax collectors and white-shirted, black-vested police officers inspected each carriage methodically. Occasionally, they would demand identification or order pedestrians to open their suitcases.

!!

Lumian, clutching his brown suitcase, scanned the scene, casting furtive glances as he sought a way to bypass the checkpoint.

Before long, a man who had observed his behavior approached.

“What’s the matter, friend? You look a bit uneasy.” The man was somewhat shorter than Lumian but twice as broad. His cheeks were plump, causing his blue eyes to appear minuscule.

As he neared, Lumian caught a whiff of sweat mingled with cheap cologne, prompting him to wrinkle his nose in distaste.

Lumian gestured toward the gates, puzzled, and inquired, “What’s all this for? Are they searching for criminals? Why screen those entering Trier and not the ones leaving?”

The disheveled, blond-haired man in a billowy blue shirt appraised Lumian.

“My friend, are you from some small city or village?”

Upon seeing Lumian nod, the man sighed and explained, “They’re collecting taxes! Tariffs!”

“Tariffs for entering Trier?” Lumian asked.

The man nodded.

“Exactly. This city wall encircles Trier. There are 54 gates, each manned by tax collectors and police. They also apprehend wanted criminals.”

“Are all goods taxed?” Lumian inquired, curiosity piqued.

The man touched his blue canvas shirt and replied, “Almost everything; only grains and flour are exempt.

“Once upon a time they were, but after the war a few years back, the price of bread in Trier skyrocketed, inciting riots and protests. Eventually, the government abolished tariffs on all food.

“Ah, if only drinkers were as bold! Liquor, wine, and champagne are taxed the most. Many people venture to the suburbs on weekends to drink tax-free alcohol at small taverns. They call it ‘town-hopping.’”

“Interesting…” Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

The man glanced around and lowered his voice.

“If you want to avoid the tariffs, I can help you into the city. All you have to do is pay me a small fee.”

“You mean bribe them?” Lumian gestured with his chin at the tax collector and police near the city gate.

The man snorted.

“Their greed is greater than an elephant’s appetite. I’ll show you a path into the city without checkpoints.”

“But isn’t Trier completely surrounded by walls?” Lumian didn’t conceal his bafflement.

The man grinned.

“You’ll see soon enough.” Then he teased, “Noble sir, do you require my assistance?”

Lumian considered for a moment before asking, “How much will it cost?”

“Three verl d’or,” the man replied with a congenial smile. “If you agree, we can depart immediately. You can pay once we’re inside the city.”

“Deal.” Lumian adjusted his dark wide-brimmed hat, picked up his brown suitcase, and followed the rotund man away from the city gate.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at a hill blanketed in vegetation and soil, with grayish-white stones peeking through.

Scaffolding, decaying pillowwood, and numerous pits were scattered about. It appeared to be an abandoned mine.

The rotund man guided Lumian through heaps of jumbled rocks to the entrance of a mine.

“Is this the shortcut?” Lumian asked cautiously.

The portly man in the blue shirt chuckled.

“You really don’t know much about Trier.

“Ever heard the saying that Underground Trier is even larger than the Trier above ground?!”

“No.” Lumian shook his head.

The man elucidated, “Trier used to be much smaller. It was surrounded by quarries that supplied stone for building the city. As the population swelled, the city had to expand outward, enveloping these quarries. As a result, the ground became riddled with holes and mine tunnels.

“Add to that the portion of Trier that sank underground in the Fourth Epoch, plus the sewers, subways, and gas pipes installed by the government—aren’t these more extensive than what’s on the surface?”

Lumian’s eyes widened in understanding.

“Are you taking me into the city through Underground Trier?”

“Yes.” The man turned, stooped, and entered the mine. He casually inquired, “What should I call you?”

“Ciel.” Lumian brushed back the golden hair at his temples. “And you?”

“Just call me Ramayes.” The burly man rummaged through a pile of stones in the mine’s corner and unearthed an iron-black lantern.

Clearly made of metal, the rusted lantern was cylindrical, with the upper section slightly narrower than the lower. A black rubber lining encircled its base.

At the junction of the narrow and wide cylinders, a polished trumpet-shaped metal piece was embedded, though a few rust spots remained.

Ramayes produced a matchbox, fiddled with it briefly, and an orange flame tinged with blue erupted from the metal trumpet, illuminating the mine’s depths.

“What’s this?” Lumian asked, puzzled.

Holding the iron-black lamp, Ramayes ventured underground, chattering.

“Carbide lamp.

“Invented by the Cave Association. Many miners use it. I don’t know why it glows, but I just need to put some rocks and water in, attach them top and bottom, and when needed, press here and ignite the mouth with flames.”

Carbide and water react to form acetylene, which burns and emits light? Lumian recalled the chemistry he’d studied a few months prior.

...

He remained silent for a time as he followed Ramayes underground along a disused mine tunnel. Then he inquired, “The Cave Association?”

“Trier Cave Association. Formed by a group of spelunking enthusiasts. Nowadays, they seem to be involved with the mines.” Ramayes turned to Lumian, walking beside him, and asked with a grin, “Why didn’t you just take the steam locomotive into Trier? The train station checkpoints aren’t that strict. They just do spot checks.”

Lumian reminisced and replied, “I wanted to experience the last vestiges of romance from the classical era.”

“A courier carriage?” Ramayes chortled. “That’s far pricier than a steam locomotive. Your accent gives you away as from the Reem or Riston region. The journey from the south to Trier runs about 120 verl d’or, doesn’t it? And it takes four and a half days! On a steam locomotive, you’d pay less than 50 verl d’or for a third-class seat and arrive in under 20 hours. So, the last bit of romance from the classical era, you say? Sounds more like a con job for folks like you. You must’ve shelled out a pretty penny, huh?”

Lumian responded candidly, “A fair amount. I’ve only got 267 verl d’or left.”

Ramayes glanced at him once more and averted his eyes.

What a waste…

Clutching the carbide lamp, he traversed an archway and veered into another passage bathed in the orange-yellow glow cast by the lamp’s flame.

Lumian glanced up and noticed rocks nestled in the darkness overhead, adorned with moss that wept droplets of water.

The path underfoot was pockmarked with holes, and stone pillars flanked both sides, supporting the cave’s ceiling.

Stones and various objects were heaped between the pillars, creating a “street” wide enough for six or seven people to walk abreast.

...

Under the carbide lamp's illumination, a steel nameplate affixed to a stone pillar came into view. Inscribed on it in Intis: "Rue à Droite."

"There's a street name down here?" Lumian queried, puzzled.

Gripping the carbide lamp, Ramayes chuckled and replied, "Didn't I tell you? This is Underground Trier.

"In fact, it was constructed decades ago during city renovations. The brass deemed the underground too chaotic, a veritable labyrinth. Rioters, murderers, smugglers, and cultists all found refuge here, and something had to be done. Additionally, numerous houses had crumbled and sunk due to the underground quarries. Reinforcement was necessary. So, City Hall spent nearly a decade repairing pillars, constructing foundations, and connecting the previously isolated quarries, subterranean ruins, catacombs, and sewers.

"To prevent workers from getting lost, the underground streets were named to correspond with those above during the renovations. Roads, squares, and alleys were recreated down here, and nameplates were hung, marking the streets. If future repairs were needed, the names could just be referenced."

"In other words," Lumian gestured overhead with his free hand. "The real Rue à Droite is just above us?"

"Yes." Ramayes pressed on. "This is Underground Trier. There's an anti-smuggling wall up ahead. Quarry police often patrol the area, but don't fret. I'll guide you through a small tunnel. Heh, the brass, with their phony collars and lies, believe they can manage Underground Trier like they do above ground, but they're only aware of half the entrances and modified routes…"

As he spoke, he led Lumian to a dead end and located a narrow crevice to crawl through. Lumian trailed closely.

Two or three minutes later, they emerged from the small tunnel. Before them stood a "wall" composed of stone pillars and a "street" wedged between.

Just then, a burly figure appeared beside the stone pillar, holding a carbide lamp, and addressed Ramayes, "Is this our customer?"

Ramayes spun around and grinned at Lumian.

"Foreigner, I've changed my mind. The price is 265 verl d'or. Wasn't I generous to leave you enough for bread and a hotel tonight?"

"What if I refuse?" Lumian's face displayed a mix of fear and defiance.

Ramayes's chubby face quivered with laughter.

"What do you think will happen? Didn't your mother warn you not to trust strangers too easily when you're away from home?"

He and the burly man closed in on Lumian from opposite directions.

Lumian smiled, set down the suitcase, and advanced towards Ramayes and his accomplice.

In the flickering firelight, over ten seconds swiftly ticked by, and the carbide lamp ended up in Lumian's possession.

Lumian crouched beside the trembling Ramayes, his face battered and swollen, and pulled all the banknotes from his wallet. In the dim orange and blue light, he counted them with grave intent.

Gently patting Ramayes's right cheek with the wad of cash, Lumian grinned.

"Now there's only 319 verl d'or left."

With that, he pocketed the banknotes and strolled toward a path that appeared to lead up to the surface.

A nameplate dangled from a stone pillar, inscribed with two lines of Intisian script: "Rue du Pot de Chambre, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman."

Someone had scratched out 'Rue du Pot de Chambre' with a stone and scrawled a new name beside it: "Rue Anarchie."

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Chapter 111 - 111 Messenger

111 Messenger

Clutching the carbide lamp, Lumian climbed the stone steps.

Soon, light appeared ahead, accompanied by a cacophony of noise. Emerging from the silent underground, it felt as if the entire world had sprung to life.

Lumian quickened his pace, twisting the valve on the carbide lamp with his right hand, stopping the water droplets from dripping into the carbide pile below. As the acetylene gas burned out, the flames in the metal mouth gradually faded.

Just then, he caught a glimpse of the scene outside.

Tall and low buildings appeared to have solidified at the moment of collapse, either tilted or on the verge of tumbling down, but standing stubbornly.

Pedestrians wore old or tattered clothing, and arguments and curses filled the air, the noise never subsiding.

At the underground exit, Lumian spotted a five-story building called the Auberge du Coq Doré.

The top two floors of the brownish building seemed like later additions, contrasting with the Roselle-era pillar walls, arches, large windows, and patterns on the lower floors. It looked so simplistic it could've been transplanted from Cordu.

Lugging his suitcase and carbide lamp, Lumian navigated through children scavenging for orange peels and quarreling adults until he reached the entrance of the Auberge du Coq Doré.

He glanced at the hotel floor, littered with yellow phlegm, shredded paper, spilled ketchup, and alcohol stains. Occasionally, a horde of bedbugs would congregate on the ceiling and walls.

Had his hands been free, Lumian would have applauded the scene.

Cordu's Ol' Tavern was much cleaner than this!

He found a route devoid of filth and headed to the front desk at a moderate pace.

A plump, middle-aged woman sat there, her grayish-white dress stained with oil and her brown hair tied in a simple bun.

She looked up at Lumian with her blue eyes, unfazed by the disdain and resistance on his face.

“This is the best and cheapest inn on Rue Anarchie, in the market area. But the owner’s a miser who can’t bear to hire cleaning ladies. He only gets freelancers to clean it once a week.”

“Does he skimp on your salary too?” Lumian asked, feigning naivete.

This set the woman off.

“Do you want a room or not?”

“Yes.” Lumian quickly clarified his intent, looking frightened. “I’d like to know the price.”

The woman calmed down.

“It depends on the room. The top two floors are 3 verl d’or a week, and the bottom two are 5 verl d’or. If that’s too much, you can knock on doors and ask who’s willing to share their bed or rent out floor space for 1 to 1.5 verl d’or a week.”

“Give me a room on the lower two floors.” Lumian reasoned it’d be easier to escape, whether by jumping from a window or taking the stairs.

The plump woman sized him up.

“Pay 15 verl d’or upfront for the whole month, and it’s yours.”

“Why the discount?” Lumian feigned the ignorance of a country bumpkin new to the city.

The woman sneered.

“Many people have no choice but to move or leave Trier after a week or two. This place is both heaven and hell.”

Lumian pulled out three light-blue 5 verl d’or notes and handed them over.

The currency was all in 5-verl d’or denominations, featuring the bust of Intis Republic’s first president, Levanx, along with laboring farmers and herders on the front, and the Hornacis mountain range on the back.

Upon receiving the full month’s rent, the plump woman’s expression visibly relaxed. She produced two brass keys strung together and tossed them to Lumian.

“Room 207 on the second floor. There’s a small diner downstairs and a tavern in the basement. You’ll find sulfur in the room’s table drawer to help chase away those damn bugs. My name’s Fels. If you need anything, just come to me.”

“Thank you, Madame Fels.” Lumian took the keys, grabbed his suitcase and carbide lamp, and headed upstairs to the second floor.

As he ascended, he noticed newspapers and cheap pink paper plastered on the walls, though some had already peeled away, exposing the cracks they were meant to hide and an abundance of bedbugs.

The second floor contained eight rooms and two washrooms. Each room was cramped, with a bed to the right. A table nestled between the bed’s edge and the wall sat beneath the window, a rickety chair positioned in front of it.

There was no other furniture, but rows of bedbugs crawled across the ceiling.

Having grown accustomed to Aurore’s cleanliness, Lumian set down his suitcase and carbide lamp, opened the drawer, and took out some sulfur. He lit it with a match, and as the pungent smell filled the room, the bedbugs fled.

Within seconds, Lumian detected the sulfuric scent from the room next door.

Almost simultaneously, some of the bedbugs returned, seeking refuge.

He quickly understood the situation: he had smoked the bedbugs into the adjacent room, and the tenant had used sulfur to chase them back.

Amused, Lumian bent down, opened his suitcase, and took out pen and paper.

Amidst the potent sulfur smell, he sat at the wooden table and began writing.

“Honorable Madam Magician,

“I’ve arrived in Trier as agreed. Please advise on my next steps, which organization to join, and how to contact them…

“Are the two psychologists available soon? When can I receive treatment?

“Do you have any new leads on Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis…”

After penning the letter, Lumian retrieved an orange candle from his sister’s room.

Lighting it with his spirituality, the scent of citrus and lavender enveloped the air.

Instinctively, he closed his eyes, his expression calming.

After standing quietly for a minute or two, Lumian used the ritual silver dagger to sanctify the candle and create a wall of spirituality. He then dripped essential oil on the flame.

With the preparations complete, he placed the Magician card on the altar, a medium for summoning a messenger to pinpoint the incantation.

Lumian stepped back, observing the misty orange fire, and muttered in ancient Hermes, “I!”

An invisible wind swirled within the spiritual wall, dimming the room.

Switching to Hermes, he continued, “I summon in my name: The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician.”

...

As the wind howled, the candle flame turned deep blue, casting a sinister, cold atmosphere.

Lumian focused on the candle, awaiting Madam Magician’s messenger.

After a few seconds of silence, the letter on the altar floated into the air. Surprised, Lumian glanced up to find a “doll” the size of a man’s forearm perched atop the carved window.

With long blond hair, light-blue eyes, pale-white skin, and an exquisite pale-gold dress, the “doll” bore strikingly realistic yet bizarre features.

In the next second, the letter landed in the “doll’s” smooth, shiny hand that lacked any skin-like texture.

“Are you Madam Magician’s messenger?” Lumian asked.

The “doll” slowly lowered its head, Lumian’s figure reflecting in its unfocused, light-blue eyes.

Its voice, ethereal and angry, replied, “Choose a cleaner environment next time!”

With that, the “doll” vanished along with the letter.

Lumian was stunned for a moment before murmuring, “Didn’t Aurore say the altar just needed to be clean and tidy?”

As he glanced around, he noticed numerous bedbug corpses on the floor.

...

The room was now insect-free.

This is better than sulfur… Lumian stroked his chin and ended the summoning ritual.

Lumian habitually cleaned the room before squatting beside his suitcase to retrieve his toiletries.

Aurore's dark-colored witchcraft notebooks lay undisturbed at the bottom.

During his journey to Trier, Lumian had already skimmed through them without finding anything suspicious. Aurore wasn't one for recording her personal thoughts or daily minutiae; her witchcraft notebook was purely dedicated to mystical knowledge, filled with incantations, symbols, and principles for selecting ingredients.

Likely due to Aurore's penchant for keeping detailed accounts, most spells included information about when and where they were obtained, their cost, or the items exchanged for them.

Lumian realized the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society likely had numerous interest groups. Aurore frequently attended 'Academy' gatherings, where many spells were traded among members. She also participated in exchanges with other groups, occasionally acquiring mystical knowledge and spells from events like April Fool's Day.

Finding nothing amiss in the notebooks, Lumian resolved to continue his investigation after consulting the psychologists and locating Padre and Madame Pualis.

He knew his sister wouldn't have mentioned the notebook without reason at that critical juncture. There must have been an important message she wished to convey.

Gazing at the dark-covered notebooks, Lumian determined to study his sister's recorded knowledge in reverse order, starting that night.

Although using spells in combat was nearly impossible for a Hunter, understanding them could help him identify any issues with the corresponding mystical knowledge or detect abnormalities.

With his belongings packed, Lumian's stomach growled in hunger.

He stood up and glanced at the window. The dimming light of dusk allowed him to vaguely see his reflection in the glass.

His hair, now dyed blond and grown out, barely disguised his features. Dressed in a white shirt, black vest, and dark suit, his cold, indifferent expression made him appear years older. Even Guillaume Bénet would find him only vaguely familiar.

Lumian patted his face, coaxing a smile, before opening the door and stepping out.

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Chapter 112 - 112 Charlie

112 Charlie

In the dimly-lit cellar of the Auberge du Coq Doré, a cozy bar had just enough space for 20 to 30 patrons.

The moment Lumian stepped in, he saw a man leap onto a small round table, beer in hand, and address the handful of customers around him,

“Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! I experienced something unbelievable two days ago!”

By the scant light from the steam lamps on the wall, Lumian discerned that the man was quite young, around 22 or 23 years old. He had short, light-brown hair and a clean-shaven face, which was flushed, likely from the alcohol.

!!

Wearing a flaxen-colored shirt, black trousers, and leather slip-ons, the man stood just over 1.7 meters tall. However, his unusually short limbs made him appear closer to 1.6 meters.

Waving his stubby arms and slurring his words, he continued, “How incredible was it? I’ll tell you, it’s changed my entire perspective on faith. As a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, I’m now ready to convert to the Eternal Blazing Sun!

“Listen up, isn’t that astonishing?

“Can you imagine how famished I was after five days? I’d lost my job and been fired by that good-for-nothing manager. I couldn’t find work even after exhausting my savings.

“For five days, I starved, barely able to leave my bed. I was on the verge of death. Do you know how that feels? Oh, may God bless you and never let you find out.

“In that moment, I couldn’t bear the thought of dying like this. I came to Trier to make my fortune, and I had to do something. That’s when I noticed the portrait of Saint Viève on the wall.

“Yes, with great effort, I managed to get up, kneel before Her, and pray for Her help. I was still a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery then, but what wouldn’t a starving man do? Besides, it couldn’t hurt, right?

“Five minutes after I finished praying, an old friend dropped by and saw my dire state. He didn’t have much himself, but he reminded me that I’d rented a kerosene lamp for use at night. The deposit was 35 coppets—a whole seven licks!

“God, I’d completely forgotten. With my friend’s help, I returned the lamp and used the refund to buy bread and half a liter of cheap booze. The bread was cold and damp, like it’d been doused in putty. The alcohol was a bit off and weak, but it was the most delicious meal I’ve ever had. Ladies and gentlemen, I was reborn!

“I found a new job today, and tomorrow, during my break, I’ll light a candle at the nearest Saint Viève Cathedral!”

Saint Viève was a female angel mentioned in the Eternal Blazing Sun Church’s Bible. She was one of the city’s guardian angels in Trier. The other two were prominent figures from the God of Steam and Machinery Church and the annals of Intis.

Lumian observed the young man’s blue eyes sparkling with enthusiasm as he ambled towards the bar.

The bartender, who was polishing a glass with a cloth, glanced at the orator on the round table and chuckled.

“Charlie never could keep quiet. Always talking.”

In his mid-thirties, the bartender sported a thin, dark brown beard circling his mouth, and his hair of the same color was tied back in an artistically casual ponytail.

Lumian took a seat at the bar and asked with a grin, “Is he telling the truth?”

“Who knows?” The bartender shrugged. “You must’ve heard the proverb: It’s better to trust a snake than a Reemian. Charlie is from Reem.”

Reem and Riston Provinces both hailed from the south. Their accents were similar, but they were mountainous provinces more akin to Lenburg.

Lumian mused aloud,”I don’t think that’s the whole proverb. I feel like there’s more to it.”

The bartender’s azure eyes sparkled with amusement as he replied, “You’re right. That proverb is longer than you’d think.

“Trust a Loenese over a Reemian. Trust a snake over a Reemian, but never trust the Islanders.”

The islands referred to the Fog Sea archipelago west of Intis. This was one of the Republic’s overseas colonies. The Islanders often played the roles of thugs and con artists in Trier.

Without waiting for Lumian to inquire further, the bartender cast a mocking glance at Charlie, still droning on, and whispered, “If he really experienced that, he certainly doesn’t know that the portrait of Saint Vièvе isn’t in his room.”

“Then whose is it?” Lumian asked, amused.

The bartender struggled to suppress his laughter.

“Charlie lives in Room 504. The previous tenant frequented the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge’s Rue de la Muraille. The image in the room was of one of Trier’s most famous prostitutes a few years back, Susanna Matisse.

“Just think. Charlie believes he’s praying to an angel for help, but he’s actually praying to a prostitute. He even feels lucky to have escaped hunger and landed a new job. How ironic!”

“Indeed,” Lumian concurred.

It was a scene beyond his wildest imagination. Reality was sometimes stranger than fiction.

He then added, “As long as it works.”

The bartender didn’t pursue the topic further and inquired, “What can I get you?”

“A glass of fennel absinthe.” Lumian tapped the bar counter with his finger, signaling he was deep in thought. “What kind of food do you have here?”

“How about DuVar broth? Three licks for a ladle,” the bartender suggested.

Three licks equaled 15 coppets—0.15 verl d’or.

Lumian appeared intrigued.

“What’s DuVar broth?”

The bartender casually explained, “A restaurant owner, DuVar, invented it. He simmered meat, sauerkraut, and turnips together to create a hearty broth. Finally, he added cheese and bread crumbs. Just one serving can fill your stomach, and it tastes pretty good. As a result, DuVar is now wealthy and has relocated to Quartier de la Maison d’Opéra.”

Lumian was currently in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, also known as the market district, situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, home to numerous slums. Quartier de la Maison d’Opéra was on the north bank of the Srenzo River, near Avenue du Boulevard, one of the Republic’s core areas.

Trier’s city walls encompassed a total of 20 quartiers.

“Sounds good.” Lumian nodded with a smile. “I’ll have one.”

Though he could restore his physical state by 6 a.m. and not worry about hunger, eating was one of the few things that made him feel alive.

The bartender nodded and asked, “Little Mummy or Somersault?”

“What?” Lumian didn’t hide his confusion.

Unfazed, the bartender calmly explained, “That’s common slang in Trier bars, cafés, and beer houses. Little Mummy means a small shot of fennel absinthe. Somersault is a double shot. Red Tomato has pomegranate juice added, and with mint, it’s called Parrot. There are plenty more like that. Friend, you still have much to learn in Trier.”

“Little Mummy it is.” Lumian sensed the bartender’s subtle disdain for foreigners, but he didn’t mind.

“Seven licks,” the bartender announced as he flipped open a small goblet.

This was pricier than the absinthe at Cordu’s Ol’ Tavern, but it was typical in places subject to city taxes.

Soon, a glass of pale green absinthe, glowing hypnotically, appeared before Lumian.

He picked it up and sipped. The faint, lingering bitterness of the refreshing taste spread and burrowed into his brain.

As Lumian waited for the waitress to bring DuVar’s broth, he noticed glass jars, hoses, valves, gears, and other items piled beside the bar counter.

...

“What’s this?” He glanced inquisitively at the bartender.

As the bartender wiped a glass, he casually replied, “Left by a previous tenant. He’s a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery. He always thinks he has a knack for mechanics and has accumulated many similar items.”

“Where is he now?” Lumian asked, playing along even though he knew the answer wouldn’t be pleasant.

The bartender paused for a couple of seconds before answering, “He went to the factory, and word is he got distracted while working and was pulled into the machinery. Half of him was crushed.”

Lumian didn’t pry further. He turned to examine the half-assembled parts and fell into deep thought.

A few seconds later, he left the bar stool and squatted beside the counter, tinkering with the pile.

The bartender glanced at him but didn't interfere. He only notified Lumian when DuVar's broth arrived from the kitchen.

After busying himself for a while, Lumian returned to the bar stool and sampled the hearty broth with a spoon.

The rich aroma of meat, the taste of cheese, the tangy sauerkraut, and the sweetness of the turnip melded to create an unforgettable flavor. The bread crumbs soaked in juice were the crowning gem of the dish.

Lumian didn't expect that a soup costing three licks would include several pieces of meat. It could genuinely fill an adult's stomach.

Once the plate was empty, Lumian pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. He squatted back beside the half-assembled parts and resumed his work.

...

Ten minutes later, he placed a machine on the bar counter.

Above the machine was a glass jar, and beneath it were intricate components connected to two rubber hoses.

Lumian then asked for a glass of clear water and poured in the remaining fennel absinthe, tinting the colorless liquid a pale green.

Finally, he inserted one of the rubber hoses into the cup.

The fashionable bartender, his hair tied back in a ponytail, watched intently and asked, puzzled, "What's this?"

"My invention," Lumian declared, tracing a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest. "I'm also a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery, with a few impressive achievements in the mechanical field."

He then extended his black-gloved left hand and gestured toward the machine.

"This is a groundbreaking machine. Its effects are beyond your wildest dreams!"

"What can it do?" Charlie, suspected of having prayed to a prostitute, approached the bar counter with a beer bottle and a curious expression.

Lumian explained, both solemn and excited, "It's called the Idiot Instrument. It tests a person's stupidity and intelligence."

"Really?" Charlie and the bartender looked skeptical.

Lumian detailed his idea, "It's easy to use. Blow into the tube until the liquid in the cup rises into the glass jar and forms bubbles.

“By observing these bubbles, we can determine the corresponding stupidity or intelligence index.”

Intrigued, Charlie said after observing Lumian, “Fascinating. Just as I’d expect from a believer in the God of Steam and Machinery.”

He picked up the exposed rubber hose and blew into it.

The light green liquid in the cup flowed through the interconnected gears, valves, and other components, rising into the glass jar above and forming a small bubble.

“What does it say?” Charlie asked, eager for the result.

Lumian’s mouth curved into a sly smile.

“My friend, the principles of this machine are quite simple. When you believe me enough to actually produce a bubble with it, that’s when you prove you’re a ‘dumb idiot.’”

Charlie’s expression froze, his eyes burning with anger.

The bartender beside him laughed.

“Excellent prank!” he exclaimed, genuinely impressed.

Lumian grinned at Charlie, waiting for the explosion.

After a few tense seconds, Charlie swallowed his anger and turned to the patrons who had been listening to his story.

“Ladies and gentlemen, behold what I’ve discovered: a groundbreaking machine! It can test your intelligence index!”

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Chapter 113 - 113 Tenants

113 Tenants

“You’re such an interesting person!”

A drunk Charlie slung his arm around Lumian’s shoulder as they stumbled out of the raucous bar.

Inside, nearly 20 people sang, gambled, and yelled, releasing pent-up emotions.

At moments like these, they didn’t seem like paupers on meager wages but rather kings and queens.

“I thought you’d play Billy B with them.” Lumian draped his arm over Charlie’s back and grinned as they headed for the stairs leading upstairs.

Billy B was a popular gambling game in Trier, one Lumian had just recently learned.

Unlike Trieriens’ favorite Fighting Evil, Billy B only required a piece of paper. Depending on the number of players, the dealer drew a grid of squares, ranging from 9 to 64. Each square was assigned a number, allowing participants to place their bets.

The dealer then determined a lucky number by drawing lots, tossing coins, or throwing dice. The winner took the entire pot.

If no one won, the money went to the dealer.

The patrons of the Auberge du Coq Doré’s underground bar were either locals or impoverished folks from nearby. Their wallets were thin, so they mainly wagered alcohol instead of cash. For instance, a game of Billy B might only reward the winner with a glass of booze bought by everyone’s pooled money.

Charlie released a long burp.

“I haven’t gotten my salary for this week. Can’t be too indulgent!”

He turned to Lumian, excitement in his voice, “Did you know? I’m now an apprentice attendant at H?tel du Cygne Blanc, the one on Rue Neuve in Quartier des Thermes.

“What does that mean? It means I get to wear a white shirt, red vest, and black suit. I’ll tie an elegant bow and earn 65 verl d’or a month! When I become a full

attendant, I hear that during peak season, I can make 7 verl d'or a day just in tips!

"When I strike it rich, I'll open my own motel—no, a hotel. When the time comes, I'll hire you as an attendant foreman. That jerk just walks around in his tailcoat, nitpicking, and earns 150 verl d'or a month!"

Apprentice attendants earn slightly more than manual laborers… Lumian reeked of alcohol, but his eyes remained clear. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

He recalled reading a newspaper in his study earlier in the year, boasting that Trier's laborers earned about 700 verl d'or annually.

At the time, Lumian didn't have a clear concept of that figure. He didn't know if it was too much or too little. As a vagrant, he'd only worried about how much food he could get each day and whether kind people might offer him a few licks. The income of Cordu villagers was mainly in goods, so he understood specific prices and the value of various banknotes, but he lacked a broader understanding.

Of course, this was also because Aurore's income was very high, so he hardly fretted about family finances.

As far as Lumian knew, Aurore's fame brought her a significant income through book sales and contracts. Last year's royalties had neared 130,000 verl d'or.

However, Aurore spent as much as she earned. Spells, materials, and arcane knowledge accounted for most of her expenses. She might also be supporting struggling members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society or donating to government- or church-run charities.

Yet what puzzled Lumian was the absence of a deposit slip at home when he left Cordu.

He knew all too well that Aurore was a saver. Spending big was only possible because she had stashed away plenty of cash at Suchit Bank and other institutions.

For a moment, Lumian suspected that Guillaume Bénet's crew had snatched it while he and his sister were being used as sacrifices or vessels.

As Lumian and Charlie made their way to the second floor, arms slung around each other's shoulders, a mournful cry pierced the air.

"You bastard!"

Bang! A door slammed, muffling the wail and leaving only echoes in the hallway.

A figure in a crisp black tailcoat approached the stairs from the far end of the hall.

He was a young man, roughly Charlie's age. His brownish-yellow hair was styled in a 30-70 parting, and his dark brown eyes were devoid of expression. His thin lips were pressed tightly together.

Quite handsome, he held a black top hat in his hand, looking more like he belonged at a high-society soirée than the Auberge du Coq Doré.

Following the man's cries was a woman's voice, heavy with pain and despair.

As Charlie watched the man vanish down the stairs, his flushed face contorted.

"What a bastard!"

"You know him?" Lumian was still rather 'concerned' about his neighbors. After all, he might be staying here for a while. The more he knew about his surroundings, the safer he'd be.

Charlie scoffed, "That's Laurent, Mrs. Lakazan's son from Room 201.

"Mrs. Lakazan slaves away, mending socks and crafting all sorts for 16 hours a day just to support that bastard. He always dresses nicely and spends her money at fancy cafés, claiming he's mingling with high society to find opportunities to make it big!

"Heh, he thinks he's so talented…"

Before Charlie could finish, another heated argument erupted between a man and a woman nearby.

They hurled insults at each other.

"Third floor's a couple who eloped. They're like this every day when they're almost broke." Charlie clicked his tongue and grinned. "My friend, you'll have to get used to it. This is the market district, Rue Anarchie, the Auberge du Coq Doré. We've got the seriously ill, the bankrupt, swindling peddlers, foreigners who never leave the inn and only drink downstairs, broke street girls, lunatics who wake up in a frenzy, jobless stonemasons, veterans, miserly old men, and wanted criminals…

"They should all thank Monsieur Ive for being so lenient. As long as they don't default on rent, he's pretty forgiving."

"Monsieur Ive… The innkeeper? The miser Madame Fels mentioned?" Lumian inquired.

Charlie grinned and replied, "That's him, a kind but stingy fellow. He even provides everyone with free sulfur!

"Burp, I haven't seen Monsieur Ive in a few days. I'm really worried he'll try to save a few coppets by visiting some random woman on Rue Anarchie and catch some nasty disease instead of patronizing Rue de la Muraille or Quartier de la Princesse Rouge…"

As he spoke, Charlie waved his hand.

“Ciel, burp. I’m off to bed. I’ve got to leave at six tomorrow morning and get to the hotel by seven.

“Burp, if you can’t find a job, let me know. I’ll introduce you to a handyman at our hotel. You can earn 50 verl d’or a month. Stick around long enough, and you might make 75. Plus, there’s free food. We even get a liter of wine every night!”

“Alright.” Lumian smiled as he watched Charlie climb the stairs.

At the same time, he muttered to himself, Simple provocation isn’t doing much for the potion’s digestion…

He had assembled the Idiot Instrument in the bar to rile everyone up. The result was successful, but it didn’t further the potion’s digestion.

During his journey from Dariège to Trier, Lumian frequently provoked others. Sometimes he felt the potion digest, but most times, he gained nothing.

If he couldn’t find a better way to act, he suspected it would take at least a year to fully digest the Provoker potion.

Heading back to Room 207, Lumian heard a bout of coughing from upstairs. He heard a woman berating her lover, calling him “lazy” and “trash.” Gunshots rang out, followed by the sound of a group chasing someone outside.

This was life at the Auberge du Coq Doré and on Rue Anarchie.

...

Charlie had said that even the police wouldn’t dare walk here alone at night. They needed a partner to bolster their courage.

Taking out the brass key, Lumian opened the door and stepped back into his room.

The bedbugs seemed to have sensed something and stayed away.

Lumian sniffed the sulfur and glanced up. A letter lay silently on the wooden table beside the window.

He took a few steps forward and picked up the folded piece of paper.

Madam Magician’s reply? Lumian mused, unfolding the letter and reading it under the crimson moonlight streaming through the window.

“I’m glad you arrived in Trier without issue. This shows you’ve mastered the basic technique of evading capture and regained your experience navigating the dark underbelly of society.

“At 3:30 p.m. this Sunday, a psychologist will treat you at Booth D in Mason Café, located in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

“For the next few days, your mission is to venture near the catacombs in Quartier de l’Observatoire and locate a man named Osta Trul. He often masquerades as a warlock to con tourists and locals alike.

“By any means necessary, earn Osta Trul’s trust and reveal your powers when the time is right.”

Quartier du Jardin Botanique and Quartier de l’Observatoire were west of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, adjacent to one another. The former lay further south, while the latter was closer to the north, right by the Srenzo River.

...

Lumian read Madam Magician’s reply over and over, committing the relevant locations, times, and names to memory. Then he struck a match and burned the Intisian-scripted paper.

Having done all this, he headed to the nearest washroom to freshen up. Afterward, he took out Fallen Mercury, wrapped in black cloth, removed his coat, and lay on the bed.

The bedbug-infested ceiling met his gaze, and the faint sounds of coughing, crying, and arguing filled the room.

Soon after, the eloped couple announced their reconciliation through a passionate and vigorous exercise, accompanied by uninhibited moans.

Outside on the street, a few coarse voices sang vulgar songs, punctuated by gunshots, followed by curses, the clashing of poles, and the sound of sharp weapons piercing flesh.

Compared to Cordu, the nights here were far from quiet.

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Chapter 114 - 114 Life Experience

114 Life Experience

At the break of dawn in early May, the sky remained cloaked in darkness. The setting crimson moon and the scattered stars cast a faint glow, thinning the darkness just enough to reveal nearby silhouettes.

Lumian awoke early and freshened up. He donned his formal attire from the previous day and a wide-brimmed top hat. He tried his best to smile at his reflection in the glass window that served as a mirror.

As he descended the stairs, hurried footsteps echoed from above.

Soon, Charlie came into view.

He was still dressed in a linen shirt, black trousers, and strapless leather shoes. His flushed complexion had turned a shade paler, and his small blue eyes betrayed unmistakable fatigue.

“Good morning, Ciel,” Charlie greeted Lumian with enthusiasm.

He seemed quite pumped.

“Shouldn’t you have left long ago?” Lumian asked, smiling.

He had only awoken to freshen up when he heard the cathedral clock chime six o’clock. Charlie should have departed by then.

Charlie lowered his head, adjusting his clothes as he muttered, “I drank too much last night and had a wonderful dream. I didn’t want to wake up…”

As they conversed, the pair reached the ground floor. They traversed the dingy, dimly lit hall towards the door reflecting starlight.

An elderly couple, grizzled and slightly stooped, opened the door. In their sixties, they were both short, the man barely 1.65 meters tall and the woman even shorter. Their dark jackets and yellowish cloth dresses were tattered and oil-stained.

“Who are they?” Lumian had expected Madame Fels or the miserly motel owner, Monsieur Ive, to be in charge of opening the door in the morning.

Charlie didn’t slow down, casually explaining, “Monsieur Ruhr and Madame Michel, they’re the swindlers I mentioned yesterday. They scam tourists into buying things.

“They rise early every day, and Madame Fels has them open the inn’s door. In return, she turns a blind eye to the mess and stench they create in their room.

“Can you believe it? They haven’t changed their clothes since I moved in. It’s been seven months. Seven months!”

No wonder it’s so filthy… Lumian could recall his own grimy days as a vagabond, but Aurore’s penchant for cleanliness still made him frown.

Charlie strode quickly out of Auberge du Coq Doré, puzzledly asking, “Ciel, why are you up so early too?”

As they stepped onto the street, a bustling scene unfolded before them.

Countless workers, clerks, and laborers hurried along in their gray, blue, black, and brown clothes, occasionally stopping to purchase food from street vendors.

Some women carrying wooden baskets moved more leisurely. They meandered between various vendors, comparing prices and quality.

The peddlers lined both sides of Rue Anarchie, occupying half the street and leaving just enough room for a carriage to pass.

They bellowed loudly, vying for customers’ attention.

“Whiskey Sour, Apple Whiskey Sour. Two licks a liter!”

“Freshwater fish from Bondi’s fish pond!”

“Fresh cod and herring, come and take a look!”

“Onion bread, one lick, just one lick!”

“Salted meat, delicious salted meat!”

“Soap and wigs imported from Loen!”

“Buy the kids a bottle of refreshing soda!”

“Hot sauce, soybean paste, scallions, water celery!”

“…”

Absorbing the sounds and energy of Rue Anarchie, Lumian turned to Charlie and smiled.

“I just arrived in Trier and couldn’t sleep. I thought I’d walk around and see if I could find a suitable job.”

As a Hunter, it was essential for him to familiarize himself with the area he frequented and understand its intricacies.

It would be too late to adapt if something were to happen.

Charlie nodded knowingly.

He said with enthusiasm, “You could try your luck at Rue des Blouses Blanches. It’s between Le Marché du Gentleman and the steam locomotive station.

“Many motel, hotel, and restaurant managers like to chat at the café there. They use the opportunity to hire dishwashers, floor cleaners, washroom attendants, and apprentice attendants.

“If you have money on you, remember to buy the café waiters a drink. They’ll introduce you to the right person and give you a shot at a better job.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s reply, Charlie shared his wisdom.

“You must pay attention to your appearance. Do as I do.”

As he spoke, he raised his hands and slapped his face, mimicking an actual slap, but with less force.

Soon, Charlie’s pallid complexion regained its “rosiness.”

“Look, look.” He pointed at himself smugly and said, “Don’t I appear more energetic? Those managers don’t want to hire someone who looks particularly destitute and sickly. They think it’ll bring trouble. They’re either unwilling to give you a decent job or will slash your salary. If you do this before entering the café like me, it’ll make you seem like someone who has a place to sleep and breakfast to eat. But doing it too early won’t work, as this ‘rosiness’ will gradually fade.”

This clever job-hunting technique was new to Lumian, a former vagabond. He found it fascinating.

He smiled and nodded.

“I still have enough money to rent a place and fill my stomach. I don’t need to do this for now, but who knows if I’ll need it in the future?”

He deliberately didn’t conceal the fact that he still had a fair amount of verl d’or.

What if a generous soul was willing to “donate” another sum?

Charlie expressed his understanding and took out 5 coppet worth of copper coins to buy onion bread from a nearby vendor.

Lumian felt a pang of familiarity.

During his time on the streets, if he could acquire money, his first choice was onion bread.

It was cheap, and the aroma of onions lingered, creating the illusion of having just eaten a satisfying meal.

...

Lumian also purchased onion bread for breakfast. Alongside Charlie, they navigated through the numerous vendors and exited Rue Anarchie.

“I love the mornings here!” Charlie glanced back and sighed with his signature zeal. “Those gangsters who deserve to rot in hell can’t get up this early. They can’t destroy this captivating vitality.”

He then waved at Lumian.

“I’ve got to take the subway. Otherwise, I’ll be late today. That damned foreman will surely dock my pay!”

After saying goodbye to Charlie, Lumian wandered around Rue Anarchie, exploring the area like a curious tourist.

Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman was situated on the south bank of the Srenzo River, in the southeast corner of Trier, officially known as “Quartier 13.” Trier boasted various quarters named by numbers, each with its own historical and characteristic monikers. Even officials sometimes used these colloquial names.

The district earned its name from Le Marché du Gentleman. Proximity to the Srenzo River allowed for a Suhit steam locomotive station, which catered to travelers from southern Intis.

Encircled by the market and the steam locomotive station, many of its streets were notoriously dangerous and teeming with impoverished inhabitants. It was one of Trier’s slums.

To the north of the market district, on the south bank of the Srenzo River, lay Quartier 5, the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative or Quartier Universitaire. Trier Normal College, Trier Higher Mining College, and Intis Academy of Fine Arts were all located here.

To the northeast of the city, on the north bank of the Srenzo River, stood Quartier 12, known as the Noel Quartier. It housed the Veterans’ Home, Wounded Soldiers’ Hospital, and several large medical facilities.

To the northwest of the market district was Quartier 6—Quartier de l’Observatoire—where Lumian planned to visit later. It contained the primary entrance to the catacombs.

...

To the southwest of the market district was Quartier 14, known as Quartier du Jardin Botanique. On Sunday, Lumian was scheduled for treatment with a psychologist at the Mason café there. This area was also called Quartier du Sans-Culottes due to the large factories located south of the botanical garden.

And so, Lumian spent nearly the entire morning traversing the streets of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

As noon approached, Lumian returned to the vicinity of Suhit's train station, intending to find a spot for lunch before heading to the catacombs in search of the phony warlock, Osta Trul.

Walking along, Lumian spotted the couple—Ruhr and Michel—who also resided at Auberge du Coq Doré.

They were hawking parcels of items wrapped in paper bags to groups that appeared to be foreigners.

As Lumian drew near, the gray-haired, ragged, and wrinkled Ruhr leaned towards him and lowered his voice. "Do you want photos of a street ma?tresse d'atelier?"

"What's a street ma?tresse d'atelier?" Lumian didn't conceal his confusion or his revulsion at Ruer's stench.

Ruhr waved the thin paper bag in his hand and whispered, "In Trier, beautiful girls who model for painters are called 'ma?tresse d'atelier.'

"With the advent of cameras and photographers, they also began taking photo subjects. As you might imagine, some of these photos were sold to painters as reference material, while others…"

Ruhr flashed a sly grin and shook the paper bag in his hand again.

"Four licks per bag, with two photos inside!

"Others sell them for over 10 licks!"

Lumian laughed.

"Monsieur Ruhr, Madame Michel, is this the souvenir you peddle to tourists?"

Hearing Lumian address them by name, Ruhr and Michel's expressions shifted dramatically.

They spun around, trying to escape, but Lumian was quicker and clamped down on Ruhr's shoulder.

Michel, who had weaved her way through the crowd, noticed her husband couldn't keep pace and returned, her face etched with bitterness.

“I also live at Auberge du Coq Doré. My name is Ciel,” Lumian introduced himself.

Finally realizing how Lumian knew them, the couple breathed a sigh of relief and looked at him pleadingly. “What’s the matter, Monsieur Ciel?”

“What kind of photos are you selling?” Lumian inquired curiously.

Ruhr responded timidly, “Scenic photos of the Srenzo River, as well as images of Trier’s castles and palaces.”

“No one is causing trouble for you?” Lumian asked, grinning.

Ruhr swallowed and said, “The people who buy them don’t dare to open them on the spot or confront us later. They feel guilty.”

“Besides, no police will bother you if you sell landscape photos.” Lumian nodded. “Does anyone really sell street ma?tresse d’atelier?”

“Yes,” Ruhr confirmed. “Last month, the police arrested a group of photographers and art dealers. They said they confiscated over 10,000 photos. If only they could give them to us. Who knows how much we could sell them for!”

Madame Michel, also sporting a wrinkled face and hunched figure, mumbled, “There was a model staying at our inn previously, but she hasn’t been around lately. Perhaps she became the mistress of some painter, or maybe she was captured to be a street ma?tresse d’atelier…”

Auberge du Coq Doré has quite a variety of guests… Lumian asked with interest, “How much can you earn in a week by tricking foreigners into buying photos?”

“We sell them very cheaply. About 10 verl d’or,” Ruhr replied, his gaze slightly evasive.

From the looks of it, it’s more than 10 verl d’or, but not much more. I’ll count it as 12 verl d’or, which is 1,200 coppet or 240 licks… 60 fools fall for it every week? Lumian surveyed the square and expressed his disdain for the average intelligence of the people there.

As for Ruhr and Michel, they took a significant risk to deceive others; yet, they only earned about 50 verl d’or a month, far less than the apprentice attendants or even laborers.

Observing their slightly hunched backs, slender frames, and wrinkled faces, Lumian understood that it wasn’t that they didn’t want to do more legitimate work for better pay, but rather that they couldn’t handle those jobs.

With a wave of his hand, he left Suhit’s steam locomotive station and headed northwest towards Quartier de l’Observatoire.

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Chapter 115 - 115 Legend

Chapter 115 Legend

The catacombs' main entrance was tucked away in Place du Purgatoire, close to the Intisian observatory. The structure enclosing the entrance was supported by grand pillars, crowned by a dome adorned with intricate stone carvings, reminiscent of a miniature memorial hall or the base of an immense mausoleum.

As Lumian approached, he noted a crowd of 20 to 30 people already assembled near the stairs leading down. Their attire varied, but most were dressed formally, both men and women alike.

A man in his thirties, sporting a blue vest, yellow pants, and a thick beard, stood before the crowd. His brown curls framed upturned eyes, and he held an unlit iron-black carbide lamp.

Addressing the gathered group, he announced loudly, "I'm Kendall, one of the catacombs' administrators. I'll be guiding you through the ossuary today.

"Does everyone have a white candle? If not, please let me know immediately."

Tourists? Lumian's eyes swept over the stone staircase behind Kendall.

It plunged down into impenetrable darkness, its end hidden from view.

Beside Kendall stood a massive wooden door, half of it emblazoned with the Sun Sacred Emblem in gold, while the other half was adorned with an intricate triangle filled with symbols of steam, levers, gears, and more.

Upon receiving confirmation, Kendall ignited his carbide lamp and led the group into the depths below. The tourists trailed behind him, some bearing lanterns.

Lumian followed, keeping a four to five-meter distance. Clutching the carbide lamp he had obtained from Ramayes, he descended the staircase at a steady pace.

Thanks to his Beyonder-enhanced hearing, Lumian easily heard Kendall's informative spiel at the front.

"After 138 steps, you'll find yourselves 26 meters below Trier's streets, surrounded by the remains of nearly 50 generations of Trieriens.

"That's a conservative estimate. In truth, the history of some of these ossuaries can be traced back to the previous epoch…

“Forty-seven years ago, there was no more space for the dead in Cimetière des Innocents or Cimetière des Prêtres. White bones lay scattered, and the stench drove nearby residents to protest daily, demanding the relocation of the cemetery…

“Ultimately, City Hall opted to go underground. They repurposed graves from the Fourth Epoch and adjacent underground quarries, creating a vast tomb… Today, you’ll be visiting but a mere fraction of it…”

Kendall’s voice echoed through the silent, never-ending staircase, imbuing the atmosphere with an eerie sense of foreboding.

As Lumian continued downward, a path lined with stone pillars and walls came into view. This passage, unlike other subterranean areas, was well-maintained and frequently repaired. It was smooth, wide, and unnervingly sinister. An icy breeze occasionally swept through the corridor.

Gas lamps were strategically placed along the path, casting a dim, yellowish light that allowed shadows to mingle with the illumination, stretching into the darkness.

Kendall, clad in his blue vest, warned the visitors once more, “Stay close and don’t wander off!

“There are countless underground areas we know little about. If you get lost, it’ll be nearly impossible to find you.

“Do not stray from the path once inside the tomb. There are passages that lead to deeper, more sinister chambers. The Fourth Epoch’s malevolent spirits lurk within that darkness. Praise the Sun and the Light. By adhering to the routes endorsed by the padres, we can avoid all perils.”

Some visitors outstretched their arms in praise of the Sun, while others traced a triangle over their chests.

After trailing Kendall and the others for nearly 200 meters, Lumian caught sight of the subterranean tomb.

Before him lay a natural boulder cave, modified over time. Its walls were adorned with intricate reliefs of skulls, skeletal arms, sunflowers, and steam symbols.

Above the entrance, two Intisian inscriptions commanded: “Halt!

“The Death Empire lies ahead!”

Kendall, the catacomb administrator, turned to address the visitors once more, “Extinguish your lanterns and light the white candles. Everyone must do this!

“If you’d rather not enter the catacomb, feel free to explore this area, but don’t stray too far. It’s all too easy to lose your bearings, and that would be a problem.

“Should you find yourself separated from the group inside the catacomb, don’t panic. Locate a road sign. If there isn’t one, look above and follow the black line drawn on the tomb’s ceiling. It will guide you back to the main entrance…’ Soon, the lanterns were snuffed out, replaced by the flickering glow of orange candlelight.

The visitors hoisted their white candles and trailed Kendall into the catacombs. Lumian observed from a distance, watching as the yellowish flames merged into a stream that meandered into the darkness.

He refrained from entering. Grasping his carbide lamp, he circled the tomb’s entrance, intent on locating the phony warlock, Osta Trul.

A few minutes later, Lumian discovered a small bonfire.

Beside a pillar, damp moss clung to the stone wall above.

A man was seated on a rock behind the fire, garbed in a hooded black robe. His high-bridged nose and dark brown eyes were framed by a flaxen beard that obscured his chin. He stared intently at the dancing flames.

Lumian approached and inquired, “Are you Osta Trul?”

The hooded man raised his gaze to meet Lumian’s and replied in a deliberately subdued, magnetic voice, “Lost soul, why have you sought me out?”

Flames and shadows danced across Osta Trul’s face, obscuring his age. He appeared to be somewhere between just below 30 and 40. Lumian spoke earnestly, “I’ve heard whispers about you. They say you’re a mystical Warlock who can help me resolve my dilemma.” Osta Trul responded in a low, magnetic tone, “Witchcraft is taboo. Witchcraft is a curse. I won’t render aid without cause.”

“What must I do?” Lumian pressed, anxiety evident in his voice.

Osta replied softly, “The essence of witchcraft lies in equivalent exchange. Reveal the nature of the help you seek first.”

Equivalent exchange. Have you been reading too many novels? Lumian suppressed the urge to ridicule and antagonize him, instead adopting a pained expression. “I’ve lost everyone I cared for. I feel forsaken by the world. Sleep eludes me each night. I want to forget these burdens and begin anew.”

Osta Trul scrutinized Lumian’s countenance, finding no trace of deception. He nodded slightly. “I, too, have suffered great losses. It’s a curse borne of witchcraft. I can empathize with your sentiments and thoughts. Yet forgetting pain is no simple task.”

“Very well…” Lumian exhaled a long sigh and turned to depart.

Osta hastily called out, “Wait. Just because it’s difficult doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

“Really?” Lumian whipped his head back, excitement flooding his features.

Osta nodded subtly and continued, “Have you ever heard of the Samaritan Women’s Spring?”

“No.” Lumian shook his head. Osta glanced at the burning bonfire and explained simply, “In one of the ossuaries within the catacombs, there’s a murky spring known as the Samaritan Women’s Spring, or the Fountain of Oblivion. Drink from it, and all your pain will be erased from memory. “Of course, it’s a fabrication. The spring is merely a puddle left by a construction error during the catacombs’ creation. The administrators spun it into legend.” As Lumian’s eyes sparkled with hope, Osta Trul carried on, “However, as a Warlock, I can reveal that deep within this subterranean realm lies a genuine Samaritan Women’s Spring, hidden in a tomb believed to be a relic of the Fourth Epoch.

“Many corpses there chant: ‘Drink the blissful waters of forgetfulness and be purged of primordial pain.’”‘ “I can help you recover it, but the principle of equivalent exchange must be honored. It will cost you 100 verl d’or.”

100 verl d’or? Isn’t your asking price a bit too low? How can anyone believe that procuring a legendary item as perilous as this could be genuine without demanding a few thousand verl d’or? Lumian had been listening closely, but the absurdly undervalued service left him amused.

How could such priceless spring water be worth no more than an apprentice attendant’s two months’ wages?

He had read about the legend of the Samaritan Women’s Spring in Psychic. Aurore had murmured a word he didn’t understand. Its pronunciation likely resembled ‘Granny Meng.’ Psychic also asserted that the Samaritan Women’s Spring was a legend fabricated by the catacomb administrators, but they were convinced the tale had its origins. The Fountain of Oblivion might genuinely exist somewhere on the Northern Continent. Lumian’s eyes widened as he hastened to Osta’s side. Clasping his shoulder, he exclaimed, “Really?”

Osta brushed his hand away and nodded composedly.

“This is a Warlock’s vow.”

“Alright, alright!” Lumian responded, thrilled.

“But I didn’t bring that much money. I’ll head back now and return here to find you tomorrow?”

...

Osta nodded approvingly.

“No problem.”

Lumian expressed his gratitude profusely, seized the carbide lamp, and departed with excitement.

Once out of Osta’s view, Lumian’s smile vanished. He raised his right palm and sniffed the faint fragrance. Before reaching the Quartier de l’Observatoire, he had deliberately sprayed an inferior cologne on his right hand and touched Osta’s body.

Back on the surface, Lumian took cover behind a pillar, concealed himself, and waited patiently.

The sky gradually darkened. As twilight descended, he detected the faint and familiar scent of cologne.

Lumian didn’t rush to pursue Osta. After a trailed while, he emerged from his hiding spot and the lingering fragrance, maintaining a distance so great he was nearly invisible. Carriages whizzed past him, and extravagant mechanical contraptions appeared sporadically.

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Chapter 116 - 116 City of Fashion

Chapter 116 City of Fashion

In the morning, while “shopping” at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Lumian noticed that Trier’s citizens dressed rather casually, or perhaps boldly. This was evident in the women wearing short sleeves that bared their forearms or garments with cut-out shoulders that displayed their collarbones. On the other hand, there was no shortage of peculiar attire.

In the Dariège region, a warlock like Osta, donning a black robe and hood, resembled an ancient legend. It was impossible for him to walk the streets openly without being stopped by the police. In Trier, however, passersby paid him no mind.

Such appearances were all too common. People dressed in a variety of antiquated garments.

Osta Trul was undoubtedly more cautious. Periodically, he would glance over his shoulder to spot anyone suspicious, but Lumian maintained such a great distance that neither of them were within the other’s line of sight. Lumian trailed Osta from one street to the next, following the faint scent of the inferior cologne.

As gas lamps illuminated the surroundings, Osta turned into a street sheltered by glass domes and steel frames.

This place was brightly lit and lined with upscale shops. Smooth marble paved the ground, and the area bustled with pedestrians -a stark contrast to the ramshackle alleys of Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

This is the arcade Aurore mentioned? Lumian observed Osta pausing in front of a store to admire the window display. He too slowed down, scanning the area.

He quickly spotted people engaging in “unusual” behavior.

Dressed in formal attire, both men and women walked turtles of varying sizes.

The turtles inched forward, and their owners, holding a rope, trailed leisurely behind.

Upon seeing a man dressed in a black formal suit and silk top hat walking a turtle, Lumian couldn’t help but inquire, “My friend, what are you doing?”

The man turned his head, revealing a powdered face.

He responded with a smile, “Foreigner, I’m simply taking a stroll, walking my turtle.”

“Why a turtle?” Lumian didn’t conceal his puzzlement.

The impeccably groomed gentleman appeared pleased to share his fashion philosophy. He grinned and explained, “Most Trieriens enjoy walking around leisurely, but they fail to grasp the essence of leisure and elegance. They always walk briskly and seem rushed.

“A true stroll is slower than a turtle. Thus, we walk turtles and let them lead to emphasize our leisurely pace.

“It’s a gauge to measure walking speed and a device to quantify elegance.”

Lumian had to concede that Trieriens consistently expanded his perspective as a country bumpkin from Cordu.

Aurore couldn’t have even written a story about walking a turtle!

“A true Trierien!” Lumian applauded, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Regrettably, the gentleman failed to grasp his underlying message. He smiled modestly and continued to follow the turtle at a leisurely pace.

Before long, Osta reached the other end of the arcade.

Lumian waited for a moment before cautiously following.

After exiting the arcade, Osta positioned himself by the nearby public carriage stop.

Within minutes, a massive carriage, drawn by two horses, arrived.

The carriage was divided into two levels. The yellow-painted exterior bore words like “Line 7” written in Intisian. The driver donned a short green coat and a wide-brimmed hat to fend off the rain.

As the carriage came to a stop, a conductor sporting a small hat, striped shirt, and unattractive pants appeared at the open door, scrutinizing each passenger boarding the carriage as if they were criminals.

Osta was the third person to climb aboard. He chose a window seat, observing the passersby and the men and women taking their seats.

Lumian watched from a distance without approaching.

It was only when the Line 7 carriage had pulled away that he quickened his pace, practically jogging to catch up.

Given the relatively slow speed of public transportation and the rule of stopping at every station, Lumian wasn't concerned about being left behind.

As he ran, some pedestrians eyed him curiously, while a few even jogged alongside, seemingly believing this to be the latest trend.

Is there something wrong with your brains? Lumian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. After three stops, he saw Osta Trul disembark from the public carriage. This area was already part of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. Osta crossed two streets and turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches, which Charlie had mentioned. He entered an old beige apartment building numbered 20.

Lumian halted in front of a street-side newspaper stand, picked up a paper, and casually flipped through it.

Simultaneously, he observed the entrance to the apartment building from the corner of his eye. "It's 11 coppets for one," the newsstand owner reminded Lumian when he noticed that he was only reading and not buying.

Lumian was holding a copy of Le Petit Trierien, and without minding, he took out two 5-coppet and one 1-coppet coins and tossed them onto the other newspapers.

The newsstand owner fell silent. Lumian continued reading the newspaper.

"City Hall discussing new price plans with the water supply company…

"Valéry slams consumerism as a fetish…

"Greatest project in human history seeks collaboration…"

The final advertisement caught Lumian's attention as he reminded him of something: It reeked of a prankster or a swindler's ploy! As Lumian kept an eye on the apartment, he read the corresponding content with growing interest.

"The future of humanity lies in the stars. The history of mankind was forged by the brave to explore.

"In this era of rapid technological progress, we lack civilization pioneers, visionaries with exceptional insight and foresight, and adventurers with courage. "Last time, we were trapped in the Berserk Sea.

This time, we're trapped within the atmosphere. However, human civilization and technology will undoubtedly overcome all obstacles and dangers to forge a true future. "We seek to collaborate with all dreamers to construct a space bridge that will enable us to walk from the surface to the crimson moon. "Point of Contact: Bulle Patil. "Contact Method: 9th Rue Saint-Martin, 5th floor, Quartier 2."

The more Lumian read, the more amused he became. He found himself in deep contemplation.

As Cordu's Prankster King and one influenced by Aurore's eccentric ideas, he had never conceived such an outrageous, ludicrous, and absurd notion. Yet, these individuals had brazenly advertised it, as though certain they could fool a crowd.

Am I still underestimating the average human IQ? Lumian stroked his chin with his gloved left hand.

At that moment, he saw a group of people approaching the old apartment at 20 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

The leader was a distinguished-looking gentleman in a silk top hat and black suit. He had a chiseled profile, a mahogany-colored pipe in his mouth, and a diamond ring on his left hand that sparkled under the light. The burly men surrounding the gentleman appeared menacing. They wore either canvas shirts or dark jackets, giving off a gang-like vibe.

After they vanished into the apartment's entrance, Lumian walked over with the newspaper.

At the base of the stairs, he detected several colognes simultaneously. One was faint and familiar—the inferior cologne he had applied to Osta. The other was more aromatic, sweet, and slightly cloying. Musk cologne? From the man with the pipe? Lumian followed the scent all the way up to the apartment's fifth floor.

There, he saw Osta Trul. The imposter dressed as a warlock found himself encircled by the same group of individuals. The gentleman with the diamond ring tapped his forehead with his mahogany-colored pipe, smiling politely. "Don't think you can shake us off just because you've moved. Until you repay all the debt, I'll follow you endlessly, like a shadow." Osta stammered fearfully, "I'll have money soon. I can return a portion to you tomorrow!"

"Very good," the 'gentleman' nodded with a smile.

He then turned the pipe and jabbed Osta's face with the still-smoldering end.

...

Osta recoiled in pain but dared not make a sound.

The 'gentleman' withdrew his pipe and said gently, yet firmly, "This is a little interest. If you don't pay me back tomorrow, I'll take one of your fingers."

With that, he placed his hand on his chest and bowed politely.

"See you tomorrow, my friend." At the staircase, Lumian pursed his lips and muttered to himself, Are people and dogs learning from Gehrman now?

As Fors Wall's "The Adventurer" series gained popularity, Gehrman Sparrow impersonators cropped up across the Northern and Southern Continents. Phrases like "this is basic courtesy" and "a bestowment or a curse" spread far and wide.

As the group approached, Lumian lowered his head and stepped aside, acting like an ordinary tenant encountering gangsters.

Chaotic footsteps echoed as they descended floor by floor, soon giving way to silence. Lumian glanced in Osta Trul's direction, noting that he had already retreated to his room and closed the wooden door.

After some contemplation, Lumian flexed his gloved left hand and adjusted his hat. He walked out of the staircase and approached Osta's door.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He raised his hand and knocked on the door.

After a moment, Osta opened the door, his face a mix of shock and fear. He stammered shakily, "I really can't get that money until tomorrow…"

Before he could finish, Lumian's figure came sharply into focus in his eyes.

...

Lumian spread his arms and asked with a beaming smile, "Surprised?"

"You, you, you…" Osta backed away as if he'd seen a ghost.

Lumian followed him into the room and smiled at Osta Trul.

"I truly wish to forget the pain of the past, but I'm also a cautious person. I'm afraid of being swindled and, worse, being mocked as a fool."

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Chapter 117 - 117 Remuneration

Chapter 117 Remuneration

Osta forced a smile.

“I’m not lying. There really is a Samaritan Women’s Spring!”

“Is that so?” Lumian approached Osta with a grin and said, “When the time comes, take a sip first. If it’s useful, you’ll forget that I haven’t paid you. If it’s useless, why should I pay you?”

For a moment, Osta was at a loss for words. He could only smile and nod.

“Trust me, trust me…”

Suddenly, he looked past Lumian, his eyes widening in terror.

Lumian ‘instinctively’ turned to look at the door, but there was no one there.

Seizing the opportunity, Osta ducked and made a break for the open door.

Thud!

Osta tripped over Lumian’s right foot, which had swiftly extended, and crashed to the ground. His nose bridge turned blue, and his gaunt face swelled.

Lumian slowly closed the door, pulled up a chair, and sat down. He looked down at Osta, who was feigning death on the floor, and said, “Don’t tell me you have high spiritual perception and ‘saw’ a bizarre creature behind me. Did you rush to the door to help me deal with it?”

Osta was dumbstruck for a moment before rising to his feet and nodding repeatedly.

“That’s right, that’s right!”

Lumian smiled and glanced at the rectangular wooden table against the wall.

Silver dagger, white candles, a few small bottles filled with different liquids or empty, two imitation goatskins, and a paper box emitting the fragrance of plants were strewn across it.

He has a certain amount of mysticism knowledge… Lumian shifted his gaze back to the uneasy Osta and asked, “Who was that guy with the pipe just now?”

“Baron Brignais!” Osta replied hastily. “He’s the leader of the Savoie Mob in the market district.”

Savoie was the name of an inland province in the Intis Republic, bordering the provinces of Haut-Hornacis and Bas-Hornacis. It was rich in mineral resources and had a valiant folk culture.

“A baron? There are still barons?” Lumian asked, amused.

Ever since Emperor Roselle’s death and the establishment of the Republic, aristocratic titles had vanished from daily life.

Osta said fearfully, “That’s a nickname he gave himself. Perhaps his ancestors held such an aristocratic title.”

Lumian leaned back in his chair and asked casually, “Why did he come to you? Do you owe them money?”

Seeing Lumian’s harmless demeanor, as though he was chatting with a friend, Osta relaxed a little despite his fear.

He said bitterly, “In order to b-buy an item, borrowed 3,000 verl d’or from a loan shark.

Later, that man sold the debt to Brignais.

I “I paid back at least 3,000 verl d’or, but he told me there was still 2,000 in interest!”

“If you drag on for another two or three months, you won’t owe 2,000, but 4,000.” Lumian watched Osta’s expression crumble, the air of mystery gone.

He then lowered his voice and said in a beguiling tone, “If I were you, I’d find a way to draw Brignais and his crew into a quarry pit. Then, I’d bring down the stone layer above, burying them for eternity.

“No creditors, no debts.”

The more Osta listened, the more panic-stricken he became. He stared at Lumian as if he were a demon.

He had a suspicion that Lumian had already plotted such a scheme, but with Osta Trul as the intended target, not Brignais!

“That’s murder! A crime!” Osta exclaimed in terror.

“Keep it down. You wouldn’t want to lose your voice permanently, would you?” Lumian warned him with a smile. “So you do realize that’s a crime? Did anyone ever tell you that fraud is a crime too?”

Osta was at a loss for words.

Lumian stood up and dusted off his gloves.

“I’m just kidding. I was testing your character.”

“What?” Osta was baffled.

Lumian wouldn’t reveal that his true motive was to establish an ice-cold, ruthless persona in Osta’s mind. It would come in handy during future “negotiations.”

Forced trust was still trust! “Congratulations on passing my test. This proves you’re not completely without scruples.” Lumian grinned and spread his arms.

He quickly steered the conversation back on course.

“What did you borrow so much money for?”

He glanced around, adding, “Doesn’t seem like there’s anything valuable here…”

Osta instinctively wanted to spout a lie but remembered Lumian’s warning.

He trembled and said, “Do… do you know about potions?”

“You’re really a Beyonder?” Lumian chuckled.

Seeing that Lumian knew about Beyonders and potions, Osta breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad he hadn’t lied.

Any fabricated story would be riddled with holes in front of a true Beyonder, easily exposed. If caught, Osta might end up “sleeping forever” in some Underground Trier hideout tonight.

Taking two deep breaths, Osta continued, “A few months ago, I borrowed 3,000 verl d’or from a loan shark to purchase the main ingredient for a potion. Combined with the 4,000 verl d’or I’d saved, I successfully transformed from an ordinary person into a Beyonder.”

“Which Sequence do you belong to? You can’t even handle a few thugs?” Lumian asked with feigned suspicion.

Osta looked defeated.

“I’m a Sequence 9 Secrets Suppliant.”

“It doesn’t sound weak.” Lumian could only gauge by the potion’s name.

Osta lamented in frustration, “I thought Secrets Suppliants were powerful too. The seller even claimed it would allow me to see the world’s truth.

“In the end, aside from heightened spiritual perception, all I got was some impractical sacrificial knowledge and ritual magic. I can occasionally sense the presence of mysterious entities, scaring myself witless, but I can’t even defeat a thug!”

...

“The ritual magic should come in handy,” Lumian remarked knowingly. Osta looked close to tears.

“I’m well-versed in mysticism. I’m a follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun. How can I pray to an unknown entity? That’s too risky! “Sigh, there are some honorific names in the potion’s knowledge, but they’re all concealed entities. Just hearing them is terrifying. I wouldn’t dare invoke depravity, true kin, or the gaze of fate!”

He glanced at Lumian and feigned determination.

“But I’ve considered it. If Baron Brignais and his goons corner me again, I’ll pray to the hidden existence and gain strength!” He was ostensibly talking about Baron Brignais, but his true intent was to caution Lumian against forcing him into a corner. Lumian studied Osta’s uneasy face and agreed, “That’s a wise decision. Baron Brignais and his crew underestimate a Beyonder. If I were in their shoes, I wouldn’t give you the chance to reach a dead end.”

He then smiled at Osta. “You’d be dead before that happens.” Osta opened his mouth but closed it again, his expression more pained than crying.

Lumian walked over to the wooden table and toyed with the empty bottles. “You’ve moved several times, but Baron Brignais keeps finding you. I suspect he or the Savoie Mob have Beyonders on their side.” Osta gasped in shock.

Lumian picked up the silver dagger from the table, twirling it as he said to Osta, “I can offer you 100 verl d’or as a reward.”

“Huh?” Osta was baffled once more. He realized he couldn’t keep up with Lumian’s thought process.

“You, you still want the spring water from the Samaritan Women’s Spring?” he ventured. Lumian grinned and replied, “Tell me, does it really exist?”

Eyeing Lumian’s amused gaze, Osta hesitated for a moment before admitting, “I’m not sure.” Lumian nodded in satisfaction.

“What I want is for you to take me to the gathering you mentioned, the one where you bought the potion’s main ingredient. The reward is 100 verl d’or.”

...

Lumian made this request partly because Madam Magician’s mission might be connected to the gathering involving Beyonder materials, and partly because he

needed a similar event to acquire weapons, materials, Sealed Artifacts, and arcane knowledge.

Osta swallowed hard.

“I-I can try, but I’ll need the gathering organizer’s approval.”

“No problem.” Lumian took out a gold coin and beckoned Osta over. “This Louis d’or is your reward for asking. I’ll give you the remaining 80 verl d’or when I can attend the gathering.” Osta hadn’t anticipated that his beating would turn into a job offer. He was momentarily dumbstruck.

After a few seconds, he cautiously approached the wooden table and took the 20 verl Louis d’or. He told Lumian, “I’m not sure when I’ll get an answer, but no later than next Wednesday. I spend the day near the catacombs and sleep here at night. You can find me anytime.”

Lumian nodded, smiling as he raised the silver dagger in his hand and plunged it into Osta’s shoulder.

Blood spurted out, and Osta staggered back in terror. He leaned against the wall and cried out anxiously, “Don’t kill me! I’m not lying!” Lumian picked up a glass bottle from the wooden table and approached Osta with a smile.

“Don’t worry. If I wanted you dead, I would’ve done it by now.

“This is called a blood oath. I’m very wary of deception and betrayal.”

As Lumian spoke, he held the empty glass bottle to Osta’s wound, allowing the blood to trickle in. During this process, he smiled at Osta and said, “You have a strong grasp of mysticism. You should know what blood means in the hands of others. Don’t lie to me.”

“Curse…” For a moment, Osta couldn’t decide whether to rejoice that he hadn’t been killed on the spot or despair that his blood now belonged to a man more dangerous than Baron Brignais. Lumian said nothing more. He tightened the bottle cap, tore a strip of cloth from the room, and tossed it to Osta.

“Bandage your wound yourself.”

He wasn’t familiar with any Beyonder curses, but he could test if expired blood could activate Fallen Mercury’s fate-exchanging ability. Even if it didn’t work, all he needed to do was convince Osta that he knew how to cast curses. Lumian glanced at Osta, who was desperately trying to staunch the bleeding, and casually asked, “What’s your plan for dealing with Baron Brignais?”

“With this Louis d’or and some money I’ve saved, I should be able to appease them for a week,” Osta said with a bitter smile. “They won’t get a single coppet if they push their debtors to death.”

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Chapter 118 - 118 Summoning

Chapter 118 Summoning

Lumian nodded, asking, “You mentioned that your spiritual perception is quite advanced?”

Osta briefly fell into a trance before a lingering fear spread across his face.

He took a moment to compose himself, then said, “That seems to be a trait of the Secrets Suppliant. I can sense hidden creatures lurking in the dark depths, and I can also feel the real world wrapped in a thick veil. Beyond that veil, emotionless eyes watch us…”

As he finished, Osta panted heavily. Lumian patiently waited for the impostor warlock to catch his breath. Nearly a minute later, Osta exhaled, saying, “In the market district and Quartier de l’Observatoire, it’s fine, but in Underground Trier, I can often sense the end of certain paths. In places I can’t see, some creature beckons me to come closer.

“I wonder what would happen to me if I truly stepped into that darkness.

A fine mystical sensor indeed… Lumian silently mocked his Hunter’s Spirit Vision while also feeling that a Secrets Suppliant wasn’t as useless as Osta claimed.

Osta continued, “Sometimes, when I see tourists entering the catacombs with white candles, I get these delusions. I think it’s a ritual that forms a magical bond with some hidden entity, protecting the tourists from being devoured by the darkness or spirited away by the dead.”

Lumian was taken aback, inwardly sighing.

In terms of mysticism, a Secrets Suppliant is quite potent… It’s just that they’re not skilled in combat…

From Osta’s account, Lumian suspected that carrying a lit white candle into the catacombs was indeed a ritual that allowed visitors to evade the hidden perils there.

The tomb administrators likely knew this, but in pursuit of profit, they not only kept silent but also encouraged higher-ups to promote the catacombs as a tourist attraction.

Lumian remembered his sister Aurore's frequent lament: "Money changes people."

I wonder, at a lower level, which one can bring about a person's change more effectively: potions, boons, or money… Lumian muttered silently with a teasing attitude.

He then asked Osta, "Have you sensed any danger lurking in the market district's darkness?"

Osta's face shifted as he replied in a grave tone, "I dare not approach the burned-out house in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman."

At the edge of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, near Rue des Blouses Blanches, stood a scorched, uninhabited house. The district's Members of Parliament had long demanded its demolition and conversion into a commercial building, but for some reason, the proposal never reached City Hall's agenda. Even after a decade, the six-story eyesore still stood.

I didn't feel anything when I passed by this morning… Lumian turned and headed for the door.

"I'll visit you again. I hope you won't disappoint me."

Osta, his shoulder wound now bandaged, flashed an ingratiating smile.

"Rest assured, I'll provide you with an answer."

After leaving Osta's room, Lumian suddenly quickened his pace. In a blink, he crouched in the shadows of the stairs leading to the rooftop, silently eyeing the tightly shut wooden door.

Nearly half an hour later, having confirmed that nothing was amiss, he slowly descended the stairs with Le Petit Trierien.

It was then that he finally heard his stomach growl.

Gazing at the makeshift barricade of rocks, logs, mud slabs, and assorted items with a narrow opening as a passage, Lumian spotted a nearby bakery and spent three licks to buy half a kilogram of croissants.

He also sampled Trier's distinctive fruit juice soda.

The effervescent liquid swirled as the currant syrup dispersed like clouds within it. The concoction set him back 13 coppet.

If he returned the soda bottle, he could reclaim 3 coppet.

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.

Before Lumian could enter the basement bar, the noise and chaos reached his ears.

Just past nine o'clock, nearly twenty people packed the intimate space. They either sat at the bar or huddled around a few small round tables, their attention riveted on the bartender. The stylish, ponytailed bartender explained the contraption on the bar to an unfamiliar male patron.

"This is called the Idiot Instrument. It tests your intelligence.

"Care to give it a shot?"

The man in the dark jacket seemed intrigued and asked, "How do I try?"

The bartender gestured at the exposed rubber tube with a solemn expression.

"Blow here until bubbles form in the glass jar above.

"Your ability to produce bubbles and their size determine the final test results."

Without hesitation, the man picked up the rubber hose and blew into it.

As light-green bubbles emerged from the glass jar atop the machine, everyone in the bar leaped to their feet, applauding wildly and exclaiming, "Welcome, idiot!" The man looked bewildered for a moment before grasping the joke. His face flushed crimson.

He shot a fierce glare at the bartender and the rowdy patrons before stifling his anger and muttering, "Interesting. This prank is really something. I'll bring a few friends to try it tomorrow."

Is this what friends are for? Lumian sneered inwardly. He pulled a barstool over and sat down, telling the bartender, "Give me the usual a glass of fennel absinthe."

The bartender grinned. "This one's on me.

Your machine's fantastic. Word of its mystical powers has spread, and people have come specifically to check it out. My business has doubled since then.

"By the way, I'm Pavard Neeson, the owner of this bar and an amateur painter. What should I call you?"

"Ciel," Lumian replied, his smile unwavering.

He noticed the difference between Trieriens and the villagers of Cordu.

In Cordu, anyone who fell victim to such a prank would seek revenge. But Trieriens enjoyed finding new "victims" and watching them get caught, easing their own embarrassment.

“You’ve got a keen brain. You’re better at pranks than many Trieriens.” To the native bartender, Pavard Neeson, this compliment was high praise.

He slid a slender glass filled with a light green, hallucinogenic liquid toward Lumian. Taking a sip of the absinthe, Lumian savored the faint bitterness that stirred his senses and made him feel alive.

He closed his eyes, soaking in the sensation before asking, “I have a few friends who arrived in Trier before me, but I don’t have their contact information. Is there a way to find them?”

Pavard Neeson wiped a glass.

“If you’re wealthy, advertise with the Journal de Trier. If you’re not, hire a bounty hunter or information broker to see if they’ll take the job. If you’re broke, go back to your room and sleep. Maybe one day, you’ll bump into your friends on the street.”

“Any recommendations? A reliable bounty hunter or information broker?” Lumian wasn’t short on cash for now and might receive a ‘donation’ from a generous benefactor at any moment, but advertising in newspapers was beyond his means. It’d cost at least 3,000 verl d’or. Smaller publications might be cheaper, but they were ineffective.

Moreover, he couldn’t risk alarming Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis if they read the papers. Pavard nodded, saying, “Anthony Reid lives in Room 5 on the hotel’s third floor. You can pay him a visit tomorrow.

“He’s a retired military man turned information broker. Highly trustworthy.” Lumian took note of the room number and name. He lifted the absinthe, swirling it gently before raising his glass to honor the bartender.

...

Upon returning to Room 207, Lumian didn’t waste any time resting.

He drew the tattered curtains and performed the Summoning Dance in the cramped space. His goal was to see what strange creatures he could attract in Auberge du Coq Doré and Rue Anarchie, preparing for potential future attacks, pursuits, or ambushes.

wasn’t According to Osta, aside from the burned-out building, there were no particularly dangerous locations in the market district. Moreover, it was quite a distance from Rue Anarchie, making it unlikely for it to be affected by a Sequence 9 equivalent-Dancer. After all, this the ruins of Cordu Village, where the power of inevitability was pervasive. Disregarding the more dangerous ones and those that Dancers couldn’t attract, Lumian believed that even if the strange creatures that appeared later were stronger than him, it would be nearly impossible for them to force themselves on him. The bluish-black symbol representing the great existence and the black thorn pattern from inevitability would be enough to deter them from

acting recklessly. In a dance that alternated between madness and distortion, Lumian's spirituality merged with the stirred power of nature, stealthily spreading in all directions.

Before long, he sensed watchful eyes upon him. Several translucent, blurry figures floated around the room.

Some resembled humans, seemingly residual obsessions lingering after death. Others were grotesque, appearing like bottles or stacked meatballs, possibly originating from the corresponding spirit world.

Lumian didn't recognize any of them and couldn't determine their traits or abilities.

At that moment, a figure emerged from the tattered curtains.

Slightly translucent, it was a woman with long turquoise hair interwoven with green leaves that enveloped its body and concealed vital areas. The rest of its fair, smooth skin was exposed, setting one's heart racing and imagination ablaze.

With emerald-green eyes, red lips, and an exquisite, alluring face, a single glance at Lumian stirred an inexplicable excitement within him.

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Chapter 119 - 119 Strange Creature

Chapter 119 Strange Creature

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt his hair stand on end as a chill ran down his spine. He experienced a strong sense of impending danger.

Subconsciously, he pulled out Fallen Mercury from his waist, ready to rip off the black cloth wrapped around it at a moment's notice.

The translucent figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings floated in midair, scrutinizing Lumian in the room. Its emerald-green eyes shifted between a misty and smiling expression, reminiscent of a deep vortex enticing the human soul to sink into it.

On one hand, Lumian experienced a familiar yet foreign urge that swept through his mind, disrupting most of his thoughts. On the other hand, he couldn't help but feel fear, akin to a flying insect encountering a spider spinning its web.

He slowed down his dance, prepared to stop at any moment.

The translucent female figure displayed an eager expression, but it instinctively sensed that something was amiss and hesitated to approach Lumian.

Sometimes it leaned forward, sometimes it retreated into the curtains, but ultimately, it did nothing.

After Lumian finished his Summoning Dance, he heard a faint sound in his ears. It was so close it seemed like it was right next door, causing the strange creatures lingering in the room to vanish one by one.

The last to leave was the female figure with turquoise hair and leafy coverings. It appeared both reluctant and perplexed.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and closed his eyes, quietly listening to the indistinct voices within him.

He couldn't make out a single word but yearned to hear each one clearly.

After a moment, Lumian opened his eyes and gazed at the window obscured by the tattered curtain. He muttered to himself, What was that?

His intuition told him that the translucent female figure was far more powerful than the other summoned strange creatures. It wasn't something Beyonders at his level could handle.

If not for the corruption sealed within his body and the bluish-black pattern on his chest deterring spiritual creatures from subconsciously approaching him even without activation, Lumian suspected something might have happened to him.

This piqued his curiosity.

How do other Dancers survive?

He had only dared to perform the Summoning Dance after confirming the area wasn't too dangerous, yet something nearly happened. How could other Dancers avoid such risks?

Is it because I obtained my boon through theft and lack some mystical knowledge, or is it because other Dancers can only attract strange creatures similar to themselves? Additionally, the Summoning Dance comes from a hidden existence, so there shouldn't be any problems under normal circumstances? Lumian pondered for a moment. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he was the anomaly.

He believed that the corruption in his body was on an extremely high level. Even sealed, it could occasionally attract strange and perilous entities.

Thankfully, the corruption also provides protection… Lumian exhaled, stowed away Fallen Mercury, and lit the iron-black carbide lamp. He sat at the wooden table and flipped through Aurore's notebook.

Reading the mysticism notebook from back to front was excruciating. Lacking the corresponding knowledge, he would occasionally feel illiterate. He had no choice but to take out Aurore's earliest notebook and memorize the corresponding symbols' symbolism and mystical meaning.

However, Lumian couldn't sit down and learn bit by bit from front to back. He believed that if Aurore's witchcraft notebook truly concealed crucial information, it would definitely be in the content from the past year or two when abnormalities gradually appeared in Cordu Village and the shepherds began their "hunt."

After nearly two hours of struggling with the knowledge known as Lightning, Lumian admitted defeat and decided to continue the next night.

He washed up briefly and lay on the bed.

Recalling the strange creature he had just summoned, Lumian placed Fallen Mercury beside the pillow, feeling apprehensive.

Before leaving Cordu, he had inspected the wicked pewter-black dirk and confirmed that the fate it had exchanged from the flaming monster was "pain from immolation." The darkness gradually deepened, but Rue Anarchie never experienced a moment of peace. Singing, shouting, cursing, fighting, chasing, coughing, crying, and exercising filled the air, composing a nocturnal symphony. Lumian had grown accustomed to the noise, which even made him feel alive.

Unknowingly, he drifted off to sleep.

At 6 a.m., the distant cathedral chimed, reminiscent of Cordu.

Lumian woke up punctually but was reluctant to open his eyes.

After a few minutes, he sat up and fastened Fallen Mercury to his waist.

His dreams had been chaotic throughout the night, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred. “Am I overthinking it?” Lumian muttered.

He opened the door and walked into the nearest washroom. Using the morning light streaming through the window, he examined himself in the mirror.

Compared to the same moment the day before, he hadn’t changed at all.

The color and length of his hair were external factors and wouldn’t reset with his physical condition.

Lumian bent down and brushed his teeth.

As he rinsed his mouth, he caught sight of Charlie entering from the corner of his eye. “Don’t you live on the fifth floor?” Lumian spat out the liquid and turned to ask Charlie. Charlie had changed into a yellowed white shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his elbows. He yawned and said, “Can you believe it? Those guys are already up before six. The washroom on the fifth floor is packed!” He then grinned.

“I still like this washroom on the second floor the most. Do you know why? It’s clean! “Although that bastard Laurent has very high eyebrows and doesn’t know how to help his mother at all, he has his strengths. He loves cleanliness. As long as he’s in the apartment, he cleans the room every day and takes care of the washroom too. Haha, could it be that he can’t use the toilet if it’s dirty?” So he’s the one cleaning… Lumian was surprised.

His impression of the young man named Laurent had been that he was cold, haughty, and impeccably dressed. He clearly thought highly of himself and seemed oblivious to his mother’s plight. He didn’t strike Lumian as someone who’d clean a bathroom. Previously, Lumian had assumed that the other tenants on the second floor had grown fed up with the landlord’s penny-pinching ways and had taken it upon themselves to clean their shared spaces. Noticing Charlie’s haggard face, as though he’d been up all night, Lumian grinned and asked, you hit up Rue de la Muraille last night?”

“Did Rue de la Muraille was Trier’s infamous red-light district. “How can I afford to go to Rue de la Muraille?

But I’ll definitely go there one of these days!” Charlie clenched his teeth and continued, “I got back to the hotel at 10 p.m. last night. Then I went to the underground bar and drank with the guys till midnight. In the wee hours, I even had a… shall we say, quite a vivid dream. Ciel, our names sound the same, but

they’re spelled differently. Can you imagine how ecstatic I was in that dream? And when I woke up, how crushed and how… uh, uh…”

“Empty?” Lumian supplied the adjective.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Charlie walked to the toilet and unfastened his belt.

His already narrow eyes crinkled with satisfaction.

Lumian pinched his nose and scoffed. “You had a wet dream?”

Charlie shivered, shook his right hand, and laughed.

“It was the most lifelike dream I’ve ever had.

The woman in it was far more beautiful than any on Rue de la Muraille. She was so tender and passionate. I never wanted to wake up.”

“Well, clearly you couldn’t hold out for too long. Waking up was a mercy,” Lumian jested. Charlie didn’t bother to argue, and instead said earnestly, “I’m planning to head to Rue du Rossignol on Sundays after I get paid and when I’m off work. There are a few dance halls there with some affordable pussies. A coworker told me that I only need 52 coppet to treat myself. “But right now, I’ve lost interest.” Suddenly, Charlie’s excitement surged. Lowering his voice, he confided in Lumian, “You know what? A wealthy guest at the hotel has been treating me really well, asking me to deliver food and help tidy up the room.”

“A man?” Lumian inquired with a hint of mischief. Charlie hurriedly shook his head. “No, it’s a lady. I think she’s taken a liking to me. I’m torn. If she makes a proposal, should I compromise my principles? You know these sorts of things are pretty common in Trier. If my ticket to my first big payday, I could soon own my own hotel.”

she’s “I figured you wouldn’t hesitate.” Though they’d only known each other for two days, Lumian was convinced that Charlie’s moral compass was quite flexible.

Charlie sighed, visibly troubled, and admitted, “She’s in her fifties.”

Lumian let out a long “oh” and his expression conveyed his thoughts.

Bidding Charlie goodbye, Lumian returned to his room to change into a jacket, pants, and other attire suited for Rue Anarchie. He spent 6 coppet on a scallion pancake and 1 lick on half a liter of Apple Whiskey Sour. Settling into a corner of the street, he leisurely ate his breakfast.

Shadows from the buildings on either side cloaked him as he relished the flavors of onions and flour, observing the hawkers, women shopping for groceries, hustling workers, children scavenging for trash, and a barricade in a nearby alley.

It was 9 a.m. when Lumian finally rose, dusted himself off, and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He climbed to the third floor and knocked on Room 5’s

door. The information broker, Anthony Reid, resided here.

...

After a sequence of knocks, a composed male voice with a West Midseashire Coast accent “Please come in.” Lumian turned the handle and pushed the door replied, open. The first thing that hit him was a faintly acrid, minty odor, likely meant to repel insects.

Then, he saw a man in his forties seated by the bed.

The man wore a military-green shirt, matching pants, and laceless leather boots. His hair was cropped to a fine buzz cut.

He didn’t possess the tidy, efficient air of a veteran. His light yellow hairline had receded considerably, leaving a vast expanse of forehead. His face had grown plump, his beard meticulously shaven. His skin was slightly oily and his nose pores clogged. He appeared somewhat guileless and unsophisticated. As Anthony Reid turned to face Lumian, his dark brown eyes mirrored Lumian’s figure. For some reason, Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of unease.

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Chapter 120 - 120 Lunatic's Ravings

Chapter 120 Lunatic's Ravings

Anthony Reid regarded Lumian coolly and inquired, "What's the problem?"

"I heard from Pavard that you're a reliable information broker." Lumian quickly disclosed his source to avoid wasting time on mutual probing.

With his plump face, Anthony Reid nodded knowingly and gestured towards a chair at the center of the room.

"What information do you need? Or rather, what information would you like me to uncover?"

Lumian felt a twinge of unease as he faced Anthony Reid, who exuded an air of honesty and dependability. He took a seat and stated succinctly, "I'm searching for two individuals."

"Names, appearances, and distinguishing features." Anthony Reid shot a glance at Lumian's left hip.

Lumian reflected for a moment before answering, "One is Guillaume Bénet, formerly a padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. The other is Pualis de Roquefort. Over a month ago, she arrived in Trier with her husband, Béost, their butler Louis Lund, and her lady's maid, Cathy.

"I don't have any pictures of them. All I can tell you is that Guillaume Bénet has short black hair and blue eyes. He possesses a solemn demeanor and strong ambitions. His most notable feature is his aquiline nose. Pualis has long, brown hair and bright brown eyes. Her eyebrows are lighter and thinner, and she exudes an elegant yet alluring aura…"

Anthony Reid listened intently before rising from his chair. He crossed the room to a wooden table near the window, opened a drawer, and retrieved a stack of white paper and a sharpened pencil.

In no time, he sketched two portraits.

"See if these resemble them." Anthony Reid handed the sketches to Lumian.

Lumian inspected the drawings and was struck by their vivid, lifelike quality. Aside from the absence of color, they were nearly indistinguishable from photographs.

He looked up at Anthony Reid in astonishment, remarking, “Uncanny. How can you reproduce their likeness so accurately based on my brief description?”

He had assumed Anthony Reid would draft several sketches for him to review before finalizing the portraits.

Anthony Reid cracked a rare smile.

“I recreated the images from the official wanted posters.

“The authorities are searching for them as well.”

No wonder… Suddenly, it all made sense to Lumian.

Both Padre Guillaume Bénet and Madame Pualis were devotees of evil gods who had been granted boons. Once Ryan and his companions reported the situation, it was bound to attract the necessary attention!

With this realization, Lumian’s disquiet grew.

I must be wanted too… Did Anthony Reid see my portrait? Does he recognize me? Trying to maintain his composure, Lumian queried the information broker, “I’m not surprised. I want to know the value of their bounties.”

“Guillaume Bénet has a bounty of 20,000 verl d’or. Each piece of information is worth 500 verl d’or. The same goes for Pualis,” Anthony Reid replied nonchalantly.

Lumian smirked. “If you uncover any useful information, you can cash in on the bounty twice.”

He was implying that Anthony could claim one share from the authorities and another from him.

Anthony nodded in agreement.

“I’ll take your assignment. 500 verl d’or, with 100 upfront.

“These are my terms. If you can’t accept them, find another information broker or bounty hunter.”

Lumian knew there was no room for negotiation. He could only nod slightly and concede, “No problem.”

Just as he was about to hand over the money, a gunshot suddenly erupted from outside the window.

Anthony Reid’s entire body shuddered as if confronted with his mortal nemesis. He instinctively ducked beneath the wooden table for cover.

Lumian was taken aback.

Wasn't this reaction a bit extreme? Wasn't this typical of life in Rue Anarchie?

Gunshots, brawls, and large-scale skirmishes were commonplace here. Those who lived in this area should have adapted by now, only needing to steer clear of the windows to avoid stray bullets.

Before long, the commotion died down. Anthony Reid took a few seconds to regain his composure before emerging from under the table.

He offered Lumian a sheepish grin and explained, "I apologize. A few years back during the war, I suffered from post-traumatic stress on the battlefield and had no choice but to retire and return to Trier."

Then why choose to live in Rue Anarchie, where gunfire was a regular occurrence? Lumian didn't press further. He had no interest in Anthony Reid's psychological issues. He withdrew a 50-verl d'or note and gently traced his finger over the image of Levanx, the bustling commercial streets, and the silhouettes of passing merchants.

Feeling the remaining texture, Lumian handed the grayish-blue banknote, two Louis d'or, and two five-verl coins engraved with the Sunbird to Anthony Reid.

His wallet felt a third lighter, and he couldn't shake the sense of money slipping through his fingers.

As he examined the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman behind the banknotes, Anthony Reid bent his finger and flicked the surface to verify its authenticity under the sunlight. Satisfied, he pocketed the money and inquired, "Do you want to check in with me periodically for updates, or should I have an address? If I come across any information, I can drop it off at your place."

"I'm in room 207." Lumian knew he couldn't conceal his stay at the Auberge du Coq Doré from Anthony Reid, so he provided his room number.

Upon leaving Room 305, Lumian's expression grew increasingly solemn as he muttered to himself, I need to be extra cautious in the coming days to prevent Anthony Reid from betraying me… Perhaps I should find an opportunity to demonstrate my strength in front of him, convincing him that I won't let any transgressions go unpunished.

As Lumian mulled over his thoughts, he made his way towards the stairs. Suddenly, he heard someone exclaiming, laughing, and sobbing, "I'm dying, I'm dying!"

Lumian glanced in the direction of the voice and spotted a man squatting by the door of Room 310.

The man wore a filthy linen shirt and yellow pants. His unkempt black hair cascaded down to his shoulders.

At that moment, he clutched his head with both hands and stared at the ground, repeatedly muttering, “I’m dying, I’m dying!”

His voice oscillated between fear and insanity.

The occasionally lucid madman that Charlie mentioned? Lumian sized him up for a few seconds, leaned in, and asked curiously, “Why do you think you’re about to die? Do you have a terminal illness?”

Without raising his head, the man continued to yell, “I’m dying, I’m dying!” Lumian smirked and strode past him into Room 310, its wooden door flung wide open.

The room’s layout mirrored his own in 207. It was relatively tidy, save for the inevitable bugs that couldn’t be evicted.

Lumian’s gaze swept over the kerosene lamp, a multitude of books, fountain pens, suitcases, and other belongings. The madman stood up and declared in a daze, “This is my territory.”

“I know,” Lumian replied with a grin. “But if you’re about to die and you don’t have any children or relatives, why not use your inheritance to help poor neighbors like us?”

He observed that the madman was only in his late twenties. His bushy, black beard had been left unshaven for who knows how long, causing his blue eyes to appear as if they were buried deep within a forest.

The madman stared blankly for a few moments before clutching his hair and screaming in anguish, “They’re all dead. They’re all dead! I saw the Montsouris ghost. They’re all dead. I’m about to die too!”

The Montsouris ghost? Lumian finally heard something distinct from the madman.

...

He had deliberately provoked the other man to see if he could elicit a different reaction. The positive feedback made him feel as if he were making progress with digesting the potion.

One of the acting principles of a Provoker is that provocation is only a means and not an end? Lumian studied the madman thoughtfully and inquired, “Why would the Montsouris ghost cause them to die and push you to death’s door?”

The madman lowered his head and mumbled, “Anyone who sees the Montsouris ghost will die. Their family will die too. They’ll die within a year!”

Is this the madman's delusion, or did something like this actually happen? If so, was it a curse? Lumian prodded, "Where did you encounter the Montsouris ghost?"

"Underground, underground! It's beneath the market district!" The madman crouched down again, his back pressed against the wall as he hugged his trembling body. The underworld beneath the market district? Couldn't he just report it to the two Churches and have them send people to eradicate the unclean beings? Lumian mused silently. Seeing that the madman had reverted to his "I'm dying, I'm dying" state, he abandoned his pursuit of the matter, exited Room 310, and descended the stairs.

Tomorrow was Sunday. Lumian planned to visit the Mason café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique at noon to familiarize himself with the area. In the afternoon, he'd head to the underground cemetery to see if Osta had received a "reply" from the gathering's organizer.

The alleys around Rue Anarchie were cluttered with obstacles made of rocks, wood, branches, and assorted debris. Even on the main road, one could stumble upon them from time to time. However, there was already a path wide enough for two carriages to pass through. These were called street barricades, and they could be found in many districts. Some bore the marks of smoke and fire, while others still had remnants of dried blood. They were a unique feature of Trier, contrasting starkly with the pedestrian streets of the arcade.

Lumian stepped over a low point at the edge of emerged from the dim alley, and a barricade, entered the street.

He then made his way towards the public carriage sign, intending to take such transportation to Quartier du Jardin Botanique. As he walked, Lumian spotted numerous vagrants lying in corners, basking in the sun and picking at lice. All were filthy, gaunt, and devoid of energy. This brought back memories of his own days as a vagrant.

Unlike the Loen Kingdom, which prohibited vagrants from sleeping on streets and in parks, the Intis Republic had no such rules in place.

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However, they were forbidden from entering fee-paying establishments or private venues. They often mocked Loen for its lack of culture.

Lost in thought, Lumian's eyes narrowed.

He sensed someone was tailing him!

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Chapter 121 - 121 Salle de Bal Brise

Chapter 121 Salle de Bal Brise

Lumian didn't swivel or hesitate, striding confidently toward the public carriage sign. He scanned the area nonchalantly, his eyes settling on the glass window of a nearby café.

Him in a dark jacket was reflected there, and not far from him, another figure in a canvas jacket and a cap.

Lumian averted his eyes, abruptly quickening his pace as if trying to catch the departing double-decker carriage.

As expected, he felt the man in the blue cap break into a jog.

The public carriage glided away silently, turning down the street. Lumian knew he couldn't catch up and halted abruptly.

Using the shop windows lining the street, Lumian caught sight of the cap-wearing man stumbling to a stop. Seizing the moment, he spun around and surveyed the dance hall opposite.

As Lumian passed the public horse stop sign, he gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Continuing on, he ducked into a shadowy alley blocked by a barricade.

The man in the cap pursued him, vaulting the ramshackle barricade with ease, but Lumian had disappeared.

His quarry seemed to have evaporated into thin air.

Just as the cap-wearing man prepared to give chase, Lumian sprang from his hiding place in the corner, like a predator pouncing on its prey. He seized the man's shoulders and yanked him backward, driving his knee into his back.

Crack!

Lumian's knee connected with the man's waist, contorting his face in pain and buckling his knees.

He collapsed to the ground with a thud, stirring up a cloud of dust.

Lumian crouched and gripped the back of the stalker's head. In a gravelly voice, he demanded, "Who got you to follow me?"

"I'm not! I'm just taking a shortcut!" the man in the cap protested anxiously.

Lumian chuckled, grabbed his head, and slammed it into the ground.

The man in the cap howled in pain, his forehead bruised, swollen, and bloody.

"Who sent you to follow me?" Lumian pressed.

The man in the cap felt indignant.

"I'm not following you! I don't even know you!"

"Alright." Lumian released his grip.

In an instant, he struck the stalker behind the ear.

The man in the cap crumpled, unconscious.

Lumian hoisted him up and thoughtfully lowered his hat to cover his tightly shut eyes.

Then, as if aiding a drunken friend, he strode out of the alley and rounded the corner. There stood an entrance to the underworld.

Lumian had "waited" for the stalker in the alley knowing he could slip underground if needed, and the setting was suitably "quiet."

When the man in the cap came to, his vision was swallowed by darkness. Only a faint light in the distance weakly revealed his surroundings.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! The sound pierced his ears, approaching and receding through layers of obstacles.

As a native of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he was no stranger to such a scene. He suspected he'd been taken underground. A steam subway passed through the "street" next door, providing the faint light.

Lumian sat in the shadows, eyeing the man in the cap. He grinned and said, "You have two choices now. Either tell me who sent you to follow me, or I'll take you deeper underground and bury you there. You should know that many people go missing in Trier every day. You won't be the only one."

Seeing the stalker's silence, Lumian knew his mental defenses were wavering. He added, "As for me, I'll navigate these underground streets and move to another district."

Realizing Lumian had an escape plan and was ready to silence him forever, the man in the cap's fear overwhelmed him. He blurted, "I-it's Baron Brignais!"

Baron Brignais? The boss of the Savoie Mob and a creditor of Osta Trul? Why is he tracking me? I met him at the apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches last night and didn't even speak to him… Lumian was baffled and at a loss. This convinced him the man in the lying. If he wanted to fabricate a story, he cap wasn't wouldn't have chosen a mastermind that Lumian couldn't fathom.

Lumian frowned, asking, "Why is he following me?"

"I don't know," the man in the cap replied, trembling. "He just wants me to follow you and see where you'll go."

Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "Where is Baron Brignais now?"

"If there's nothing else, he's usually at the Salle de Bal Brise on Avenue du Marché." The man in the cap strained to read Lumian's expression, but the light was too dim. Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian recalled the landmark buildings in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman from his recent recon.

Avenue du Marché was the main road connecting Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman to the Suhit steam locomotive station, stretching two kilometers. Salle de Bal Brise was near the market district, its unique statue at the entrance unforgettable. Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he told the stalker, "Take me there. I want to talk to Baron Brignais."

The man in the cap sighed in relief, feeling as if his life had been spared.

Who would hold the upper hand or be "accidentally" killed at Salle de Bal Brise was no longer his concern.

Salle de Bal Brise occupied the bottom two floors of a khaki-colored building. The second floor housed a café, while the first was a bustling dance hall-though it had just opened and few customers were present. A white, spherical statue composed of countless skulls greeted visitors at the entrance. Inscribed in Intis were the words: "They sleep here, waiting for the arrival of happiness and hope[1]."

Lumian surveyed the scene and trailed his 'guide' around the statue to the dance hall entrance.

Two burly men in white shirts and black coats stood guard. They simultaneously rested their right hands on their waists and questioned the man in the cap, "Maxime, who is he?"

"H-he's here to see Baron Brignais," Maxime stammered.

Under the guards' suspicious scrutiny, Lumian replied coolly, "It's up to Baron Brignais to decide if he wants to see me or not, not you. Do you want to bear his wrath?" After a moment's hesitation, one of the guards turned and entered the

dance hall.

As they waited, Lumian casually asked Maxime, “What’s up with the statue and the inscription? They don’t match the dance hall at all.”

Of course, it was cool. Maxime nervously glanced at the grinning Lumian and explained, “This was originally an moved annex to the cathedral. Later, the bones were to the catacombs, leaving the area empty. Then, this building was constructed. “Although those bones were purified or just ashes, the Savoie Mob found it too creepy after buying this place. We had no choice but to commission a statue symbolizing death and an inscription representing the dead to appease any lingering bones that might remain underground and unexcavated.” Lumian found the idea of people dancing here amusing, considering it could disturb the skeletons below, essentially dancing on their heads.

Just then, the guard returned and informed Lumian, “Baron Brignais will meet you at the café on the second floor.”

“Alright.” Lumian held his head high and strutted into the Salle de Bal Brise.

First, he noticed the dance floor encircled by railings and the half-height wooden stage up ahead for singers. Then, his attention was drawn to the haphazard seating and the various perfumes and cosmetics wafting through the air.

Maxime hesitated before following Lumian. He felt compelled to report the situation to the baron, lest he end up missing in the underworld.

Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian recognized the gentleman he had encountered the night before.

In his thirties, the man sported a black, thin-tweed formal suit. His brown hair appeared naturally curly, and his brown eyes held a confident smile. His features were sharply defined. Baron Brignais set down his coffee and grasped the mahogany pipe with his diamond-adorned palm.

...

“What would you like to drink?” He was surprisingly polite and generous.

Eyeing the four thugs with their hands on their waists, Lumian addressed Baron Brignais, “Why did you send someone to follow me?”

last Baron Brignais smiled and admitted candidly, “I saw you at Rue des Blouses Blanches night and again near Rue Anarchie today. The more I observed you, the more familiar you seemed, so I had Maxime follow you to confirm your intentions in the market district.

“You were searching for Osta last night too, weren’t you?”

“He tried to scam me out of my money,” Lumian replied before inquiring, “Why do I seem familiar to you?”

Baron Brignais took a puff from his pipe and grinned.

“To experienced individuals like us, your actions can hardly be considered a disguise.

“Once we grow suspicious and connect the dots, we’ll naturally recognize you—Lumian Lee, a wanted criminal with a 3,000 verl d’or bounty.”

My bounty is only 3,000 verl d’or? Lumian’s initial reaction was confusion.

As the source of Cordu’s time loop, how could his official bounty be lower than that of the padre and Madame Pualis?

“However, merely providing information about you is worth 500 verl d’or,” Baron Brignais added with a smile. “Young man, you need a book called Men’s Aesthetics. Don’t be embarrassed. In Trier, it’s quite normal for men to wear makeup. It’ll help you conceal your true identity.”

...

This “gentleman” had also applied eyeliner and powder.

Lumian smirked.

“Are you planning to capture me for the bounty?”

[1] This quote is from an inscription on the entrance of the Salle de Bal Brise in Paris during the Victorian era. I made some modifications to the original inscription. The ballroom was indeed built on the site of an old cemetery, and even used the stones left behind after the cemetery was relocated. It’s like dancing on graves. The previous mention of walking turtles also refers to events that really happened during that time.

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Chapter 122 - 122 Each With Their Own Plans

Chapter 122 Each With Their Own Plans

Baron Brignais didn't immediately respond to Lumian's question. Setting down his mahogany-colored pipe, he calmly took a sip of coffee.

After a moment, he smiled and said, "I'm not an official. I have no obligation to help them capture wanted criminals.

"Turning over anyone who's wanted would cost my Savoie Mob a great deal of valuable talent.

"More importantly, your bounty isn't impressive. It's far from tempting me. However, if you cause any trouble in the market district, I won't hesitate to tie you up and hand you over to the police for a considerable bounty."

The unspoken message from Baron Brignais was clear: There were many wanted criminals in the Savoie Mob. As long as you behaved, he could turn a blind eye.

Lumian understood. "You had someone tail me to confirm my intentions?"

Baron Brignais nodded approvingly.

"I'm glad you comprehend."

Lumian scanned the faces of the thugs, then calmly stated, "You've seen my wanted poster, so you've seen the others.

"My sole purpose in Trier is to find them."

"Excellent." Baron Brignais recognized that Lumian had no intention of crossing the Savoie Mob.

He gestured to the chair opposite the booth.

"Care for a cup of coffee?"

"No need." Lumian declined the offer. "I just want to locate those people as soon as possible."

He spread his arms wide and proclaimed, "Praise the Sun for allowing us to live in the light!"

With that, Lumian turned and strode toward the stairs, unconcerned about the hidden guns of the thugs.

Once his footsteps vanished down the staircase, Baron Brignais turned to the reserved Maxime and said gently, “Tell me exactly how you were discovered and coerced by him. Spare no detail.”

With the mahogany-colored pipe back in his mouth, Baron Brignais leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Trembling, Maxime recounted his ordeal from start to finish.

After hearing the account, one of the thugs asked indignantly, “Baron, why didn’t you teach that punk a lesson? Why let him walk away so easily?”

Baron Brignais tapped the mahogany pipe on the table twice and inquired with a smile, “Teach him a lesson? Do you know his Sequence, his abilities, or his weapons?”

“I don’t,” the thug admitted.

Baron Brignais rose, gripping the mahogany-colored pipe and smashing it against the thug’s head.

Blood flowed from the gash in the thug’s forehead, but he didn’t dare to cry out or dodge. He stood there, terror etched on his face.

Baron Brignais withdrew the pipe and regarded him coldly.

“You dare challenge him without knowing anything? Go ahead, take my place. Let’s see how long you’ll survive!”

Ignoring the thug’s response, Baron Brignais smiled again.

As he wiped his pipe with a folded white handkerchief from his chest pocket, he casually remarked, “Didn’t you notice something off about Lumian Lee’s wanted poster?

“The difference between the bounties for capturing him and providing information is too small. One is a mere 3,000 verl d’or, the other 500. “What does that mean? It means the authorities don’t want us handling Lumian Lee directly. They want us to provide intel so they can act themselves.

“Two possible reasons come to mind. First, Lumian Lee is incredibly dangerous. Allowing bounty hunters to pursue him would cause widespread casualties and unnecessary losses. Second, he possesses something valuable that officials don’t want to end up in the hands of the bounty hunters.

“If I had just taught Lumian Lee a lesson, the second scenario would’ve been fine. But if it’s the first possibility, what do you think our chances of survival are?”

The thug nodded repeatedly, not daring to argue.

Baron Brignais sat back down, picked up his coffee cup, and continued, "Moreover, based on how he dealt with Maxime and his audacity to approach me directly, I can tell that he's ruthless, decisive, and utterly confident in his abilities.

"I wager that if I had threatened him, demanding his total submission, he would have attacked without hesitation. He's the type who won't hesitate to kill.

"Heh, this is both his strength and his weakness. Unaware of my capabilities or the number of traps laid here, he still dares to confront me with the intention of killing me to ensure my silence. Sooner or later, he'll pay the price."

Baron Brignais sipped his coffee and closed his eyes.

"Let's wait and see if we should offer him assistance and protection. This ruthless country boy with a warrant on his head could prove to be a very useful weapon.' Outside the Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian glanced back at the white spherical statue made of skulls and headed toward the nearest public carriage station.

On his way here, he had already devised a plan to deal with them, but ultimately didn't execute it.

He had expected that if Baron Brignais threatened him with the wanted poster or showed any hostility, he would feign fear and reveal that he was wanted for stealing a powerful Beyonder weapon from Cordu's ruins.

He'd offer to hand it over in exchange for protection.

If Baron Brignais was strong and confident, and allowed Lumian to approach with the weapon, Lumian would launch a fake assassination attempt, a ruse to actually hand over the Fallen Mercury to the other party.

In that case, the unsuspecting Baron Brignais would become the evil dirk's puppet due to his gloveless hand. Having interacted with and occasionally "communicated" with Fallen Mercury for some time, Lumian had earned a degree of control over it. As long as it didn't conflict with its instinct to find a knife wielder, it would follow Lumian's orders, even when in someone else's hands.

Eventually, Baron Brignais would abandon his animosity and become an ally. After a few days, when no one suspected Lumian, the baron would mysteriously vanish into the depths of Underground Trier with a handful of his subordinates who knew about the matter, never to be seen again.

If Baron Brignais didn't allow Lumian to approach with Fallen Mercury and instead sent one of his thugs to retrieve the pewter-black dirk, Lumian's strategy would be to first transform the thug into the wielder. Then, he would use cunning to hide the abnormality and give Fallen Mercury the corresponding instructions.

In the future, if he made the puppet attack Baron Brignais, the baron would inherit the fate of being the wielder. After completing this task, Lumian would escape if possible or surrender and wait for the fate exchange to finish. Even if the puppet died due to exhaustion, as long as Fallen Mercury wasn't severely damaged, the fate exchange wouldn't stop.

As for the torture he might endure after surrendering, Lumian didn't mind. As long as he wasn't dead, he would fully recover by six the next morning. Regarding the possibility of Baron Brignais becoming a wielder and turning into a zombie with evident signs of decay, Lumian had a solution.

Baron Brignais himself had mentioned that men wearing makeup in Trier was common, and he was likely an avid reader of Men's Aesthetics.

Cologne could mask the stench of decay, and cosmetics could conceal rotting skin! Truth be told, Lumian had struggled with whether to act in the café on the second floor of the Salle de Bal Brise. Ultimately, he decided against it because Baron Brignais had shown a degree of kindness to a wanted criminal like him.

Such kindness from a villain often meant they wanted to exploit him.

If Baron Brignais truly wants to use me, he'll definitely help me conceal my identity and inform me of any unusual movements from bounty hunters in advance… As Lumian thought, he smiled.

This was a good thing!

As for the risk of ending up in a dangerous situation due to being used, Lumian already had a plan.

By then, he should be well-acquainted with Baron Brignais. Familiarity made striking easier! Lumian had only one option when being used for dangerous and unthinkable tasks: kill Baron Brignais.

...

Phew… Lumian exhaled and considered how to better disguise himself.

Initially, he had been confident in his disguise. As long as he didn't "reveal" his connection to the padre and Madame Pualis like he had with Anthony Reid, he wouldn't be recognized. However, the incident with Baron Brignais made him realize that he had underestimated other Beyonders.

If there were Hunters adept at tracking, there might be other Sequences even better at recognizing people.

Baron Brignais or one of his subordinates must possess similar abilities… Lumian nodded imperceptibly.

This was confirmed by the fact that Osta had relocated several times.

With this realization, Lumian halted at the stop sign and boarded a brown double-decker carriage. He paid 30 coppets to secure a spot inside the carriage. Had he chosen a seat on the roof, it would have cost him only 15 coppets. The carriage gradually moved toward Quartier de l'Observatoire.

Lumian gazed out the window, taking in the sight of hurried passersby dressed in various attire.

He observed ringing bicycles, rental carriages from different companies, and humanoid machines composed of gears, valves, pipes, and levers. The metal backpack on its back spewed white steam, propelling it forward step by step.

"Praise the Sun!"

The blazing sun beat down on the pedestrians, their arms outstretched in the street. Clang! Clang! Clang! The nearby cathedral bell chimed. It was noon.

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Chapter 123 - 123 Organizer

Chapter 123 Organizer

Lumian initially planned to scope out Mason Café before noon to ensure he'd know where to escape after his treatment the following day. However, the incident with Baron Brignais had significantly delayed him. He had no choice but to find Osta Trier first and visit the Quartier du Jardin Botanique later in the afternoon.

Osta was in his usual spot, by the entrance to the catacombs, a bonfire flickering against a stone pillar.

The sound of footsteps approaching caught Osta's attention, and he looked up from under his black hooded robe.

Expecting to make a quick buck, he instead froze in place.

Quickly recovering, he stood up and forced a smile. Before Lumian could speak, Osta preempted him, saying, "I contacted the organizer this morning, told him I have a friend who's into mysticism and wants to attend the gathering. He hasn't replied yet."

Lumian nodded, not questioning how Osta had reached out to the organizer. He walked over to the bonfire, found a rock, and sat down. Casually, he asked, "You've duped plenty of people, but you're always in the same spot. Aren't you scared they'll track you down?"

Osta laughed and replied, "Most of the time, it's not really deception. As a true Beyonder and Secrets Suppliant, using my spirituality to perform divination for them isn't a scam.

"My predictions are far more accurate than most in the mysticism club!

"Sometimes, different folks need different strokes. If I'm ever exposed, I can always talk my way out."

"How?" Lumian inquired with a smile.

Osta coughed.

"The key is to not be too clear or absolute from the start. That way, you can accuse them of misunderstanding your intentions."

Lumian's smile deepened.

“When it came to the Samaritan Women’s Spring, you agreed too easily and made your promise too definite.”

Osta’s expression fell.

“Yeah, I was cornered by Baron Brignais. I just wanted the money right away.

“The right approach would’ve been to say I had a solution, but it was difficult to achieve. After you begged me repeatedly, I’d reluctantly accept your cash, warning I couldn’t guarantee success…”

Evidently, Osta had pondered his mistakes the previous night, considering how to avoid risks if he had to start over. He grew more animated as he spoke, only stopping when he noticed Lumian’s subtle grin.

How could he openly tell this dangerous man how to swindle him? Osta awkwardly smiled and said, “But I doubt this would’ve fooled you either. You’re the most cautious person I’ve ever met.”

Lumian smiled and shook his head. “You really picked the wrong pathway.”

Osta didn’t dare to carry on. Instead, he asked, “I thought about it last night. I never mentioned gatherings when we talked. I just said I bought the potion’s main ingredient. How’d you know it was a mysticism gathering?”

Lumian chuckled.

“It was just a gut feeling.”

Internally, he criticized, Aren’t there only two possibilities? Either a one-on-one deal or a gathering. There was at least a 50% chance of guessing right! It was just a casual comment.

No harm done if I was wrong!

Osta stared at Lumian, increasingly fearful.

It was becoming harder to guess this dangerous man’s Sequence. He appeared skilled in combat, possessed strong spirituality, and had an intuition bordering on precognition.

Lumian savored the warmth of the bonfire and offhandedly asked, “How did you get involved with the mysticism gathering?”

Osta’s face took on a nostalgic expression.

“Everyone comes to Trier with hope. Painters dream of having their works chosen by the World’s Artists Exhibition, but most fail. Every year, some succumb to madness or suicide. “Poor authors living in cheap apartments hope to replicate the success of best-sellers like Aurore and Meniere, but they end up selling their

stories to small newspapers. They're forced to bear scathing reviews like 'trite,' 'mediocre,' and 'cliché.' Many of them have even stooped to writing smut for underground booksellers, risking arrest by detectives.

"Over a decade ago, I came to Trier from Cécilis Province, eager to make a fortune. I lived in a leaky attic, climbed scaffolding, worked in factories, smuggled illegal books, and sold soda. I made some money, but with each passing year, I realized I'd never be rich. Owning a home and enjoying leisurely mornings before work were impossible dreams.

"Eventually, I discovered mysticism magazines like Psychic and Mysteries. Perhaps I still fantasized about gaining superpowers overnight and changing my fate, so I started attending gatherings with fellow enthusiasts. Those magazines would publish the relevant information.

"Earlier this year, a friend from the group asked if I wanted to join a gathering with real Beyonder powers. I couldn't refuse. You know the rest."

Lumian listened without interrupting Osta's account.

When Osta finished, Lumian asked, "Is that friend the gathering's organizer?"

"No," Osta shook his head. "The organizer goes by 'Mr. K.' He always wears a massive hood, practically covering his entire face."

"Mr. K…" Lumian committed the codename to memory and pondered for a moment. "What abilities has he shown?"

Osta shook his head again.

"I've never seen any. But after becoming a Secrets Suppliant, I sensed I was facing shadows and deep darkness when meeting him. I think he's very powerful." He seems powerful. I wonder who's stronger— him, the padre, or Madame Pualis… Lumian mused before asking curiously, "Did you sense anything special around me?"

Osta hesitated before admitting, "No, but your dangerous aura frightens me more than even Baron Brignais.' Lumian glanced at his left chest and smiled.

"That's good."

Osta was taken aback, not understanding Lumian's meaning.

Lumian changed the subject. "Have you heard of the Montsouris ghost?"

"Of course." As a con artist posing as a warlock, Osta knew many stories about Underground Trier. "Legend has it that an evil spirit lurks in this dark, vast underground. It always travels alone, never seeming to reach its destination. Those who encounter the ghost either die instantly or suffer mysterious deaths along with their families within the year.

“Those who’ve claimed to see the Montsouris ghost went mad and died within a year. I’ve heard both Church factions sent experts to search for the spirit, but they found nothing.” It sounds plausible… Lumian didn’t inquire further. Standing, he told Osta, “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow night or the following morning.”

“Alright.” Though Osta didn’t believe Lumian would harm him now, he couldn’t help but sigh with relief at the departure of the dangerous man.

No ordinary human could feel at ease around a tiger!

On his way back to the surface, Lumian carried the carbide lamp and passed by the entrance to the catacombs. Once again, he saw the arch adorned with white bones, sunflowers, and steam symbols.

Looking at the words “Stop! The Death Empire lies ahead!” Lumian cautiously approached the natural doorway separating the inner and outer chambers.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from behind the stone arch and bellowed, “Halt!” The figure donned a blue vest and yellow pants. He was an elderly man with gray hair and wrinkled skin.

His light-yellow eyes, slightly clouded, locked onto Lumian.

“Can’t I go in?” Lumian feigned the innocence of a foreigner.

The old man scrutinized him. “You need to purchase a ticket upstairs and bring a white candle with you.”

“I have a friend buried inside. Do I need to buy a ticket to pay my respects?” Lumian fabricated a friend on the spot.

...

The old man eyed him suspiciously, “Don’t tell me you’re one of those Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative college students? Those troublemakers always concoct lies to sneak into the tomb. They sing, dance, and feast in the ossuary! Fine, go in. Just remember to bring lit white candles like them. That’s my only demand!”

Lumian once worried that if he attended university, he’d be too different from his classmates. Now, it seemed his concerns were unfounded.

Those students were even wilder than he was! “Alright,” Lumian feigned disappointment. “I’ll bring a white candle next time.”

The old man nodded, relieved. Lumian turned and followed the restored path to the stairs leading to the surface. Over a hundred meters away, he suddenly spotted a black shadow from the corner of his eye.

The shadow hunched slightly, shuffling behind a row of stone pillars on the left. Lumian glanced over and noticed its intangibility, as if it were almost illusory.

Instinctively, he raised the carbide lamp, casting a bluish-yellow glow. The shadow disappeared, as though it had never existed.

Lumian quickly scanned the surroundings but found nothing.

Is it an illusion or an underground ghost? As Lumian pondered, he suddenly wondered: Could it be the Montsouris ghost? Did I encounter the Montsouris ghost?

His pupils widened, and his expression grew unusually grave.

Moments later, Lumian erupted into laughter, nearly doubling over. He laughed until tears threatened to spill from his eyes. “Haha, come on, come at me! I want to see how you’ll kill my entire family and how you’ll cause my mysterious death!”

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Chapter 124 - 124 Method of Self-Protection

Chapter 124 Method of Self-Protection

As planned, Lumian circled the vicinity of Mason Café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique before making his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré on Rue Anarchie. He headed straight for the third floor and arrived at Room 310, where the lunatic resided.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He hammered on the door.

“I’m dying! I’m dying!” The wailing from inside grew frantic.

“I’m f*cking dying too!” Lumian spat, his face expressionless.

Startled by his response, the lunatic fell silent and offered no reply.

Lumian didn’t knock again. He produced a small wire he carried with him, inserted it into the keyhole, and fidgeted with it.

With a click, the grimy brown wooden door swung open.

Inside, Lumian found the madman, clad in a linen shirt and yellow pants, kneeling with his thick black beard nearly covering his eyes.

Lumian entered and casually closed the door. He crouched before the lunatic and lowered his voice.

“I’ve encountered the Montsouris ghost too.” The lunatic visibly trembled, his fear-filled blue eyes showing the faintest glimmer of lucidity.

After a few seconds, he caught his breath and asked in a deep voice, “Are you sure it was the Montsouris ghost?”

He’s in that state of intermittent lucidity Charlie mentioned? Lumian smirked and replied, “I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you to confirm it.

“What did the Montsouris ghost you saw look like?”

With a shiver, the lunatic described, “A black shadow, like a lonely old man. Its back was slightly hunched, and it moved very slowly.

“After I spotted it, it vanished into the darkness. I didn’t realize it was the Montsouris ghost until my parents, my wife, and my children started dying one after another…”

It’s eerily similar to my experience… Lumian frowned, suspecting that he had indeed encountered the Montsouris ghost.

He contemplated for a moment.

“How did your family die? Were you attacked?”

The lunatic hastily shook his head.

“I-I often felt something watching me from the shadows. But I didn’t face anything else. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have made it this far.

“My child became gravely ill and died in the hospital. We had just cleansed and interred him in the catacombs when my wife-my wife, snapped and hanged herself in our room.

“That’s when I recalled the legend of the Montsouris ghost. I took my parents to the cathedral and asked the padre there to protect us.

“The Church took it very seriously and assigned three clergymen to stay at my home. Nothing happened during that time. I thought the nightmare was over.

“But after the New Year, the clergymen left. Soon after, my father strangled my mother and ended his own life with a table knife. I can’t remember much after that. Sometimes, I wake up and realize that I moved here at some point…”

The lunatic’s blue eyes revealed unmasked anguish. Lumian felt like a tightly wound spring, ready to snap at any moment.

“They said the Montsouris ghost would kill anyone who encountered it back then. But this lasted until the New Year.” Lumian keenly noticed the lunatic’s account differed from the legend.

The lunatic shook his head.

“I don’t know why it happened. I thought the nightmare was over. Otherwise, the three clergymen wouldn’t have left…”

A curse with no time limit until all targets are dead? Lumian formed a new hypothesis about the Montsouris ghost legend.

He stood up and told the lunatic, “I might have encountered the Montsouris ghost too. Let’s see which one of us lasts longer. If I figure out how to break this curse, you can pay me to help you.”

“A way, a solution…” The corners of the lunatic’s mouth twitched as he echoed Lumian’s words, caught between tears and laughter.

He raised his hands and clutched his hair.

“I’m dying, I’m dying!”

Lumian intended to ask the lunatic’s name, something to inscribe when he was laid to rest in the cemetery or catacombs, but he shook his head, opened the door, and left Room 310 instead.

Back in Room 207, Lumian sat on the bed, mulling over how to break the curse brought by the Montsouris ghost.

Although theoretically, the curse might not take effect until year’s end, leaving no urgency for now, Lumian couldn’t rely on the Montsouris ghost’s apparent delay. Moreover, he had no immediate family, so he stood a high chance of being the curse’s first victim. It could happen in the latter half of the year, next week, or even tonight.

Come to think of it, that man might still be alive. If the Montsouris ghost could help me kill him, I’d owe it a debt of gratitude… Lumian’s thoughts raced, and he suddenly laughed at himself.

In the dream, he had lied to Ryan and the others, claiming he’d forgotten his original name. He simply wanted to avoid mentioning or remembering it.

When he was young, his family had been well-off, but the man he called father turned out to be a philanderer and later a gambling addict.

His mother died from grief-induced illness, and his grandfather went bankrupt. They lived together in the slums until his grandfather’s death a few years later.

Thus, after being adopted by Aurore, Lumian had willingly asked to take her last name and change his own.

Lumian didn’t know if the man who had only provided genetic material was dead or alive. If he was dead, it was a blessing. If not, he hoped the Montsouris ghost would step up its game. As for himself, Lumian dared not assume the Montsouris ghost wouldn’t harm him just because he harbored the taint of an evil god and the mark of a great existence.

As long as it didn’t possess him, the ghost could do anything! According to Madam Magician, Lumian was convinced that many Beyonders and monsters could easily kill him, but they would have to face the ensuing corruption as a consequence. I’m not certain if this is a curse or not… But I can’t just sit here waiting for death. I have to take action… Aurore used to say that the best skill for the weak or underage is ‘finding their parents’… With this in mind, Lumian’s eyes brightened. He stood up and walked to the table to find a pen and paper.

He planned to update Madam Magician on the mission's progress. Simultaneously, he would mention his encounter with the Montsouris ghost, questioning if he had been cursed and how to address the issue.

Though the woman with the Magician code name wasn't his parent, she was undoubtedly his superior in the current circumstances. It was logical to seek assistance from his superior when in trouble!

Lumian pondered for a moment before writing: "Esteemed Madam Magician, "I have followed your instructions and gained Osta Trul's trust. I've also requested his introduction to Mr. K's mysticism gathering… "On my return from the catacombs, I regrettably encountered the legendary Montsouris ghost. Of course, I cannot be certain. "The specific legend is as such… "I seek to know if I have been cursed by the Montsouris ghost or if another influence is at play. How should I proceed?"

Towards the end, Lumian intentionally added the code name "Seven of Wands" to remind the recipient not to overlook his status as an external member of their enigmatic organization.

Lumian deduced this from the lady's use of the tarot cards' Magician code name and his Seven of Wands.

He suspected Madam Magician might belong to a clandestine organization symbolized by tarot cards and devoted to a powerful entity. The Major Arcana were official members, possessing formidable abilities. The Minor each Arcana served as peripheral members who undertook various missions.

After folding the letter, Lumian meticulously cleaned the room. He crushed a few bedbugs that had crept in from next door and disposed of them in the bathroom trash can. Once done, he lit the candle and conjured a spiritual barrier to summon Madam Magician's messenger in his name.

Before long, the candle flame transformed into a deep blue hue.

This time, an arm-height, doll-like messenger in a light-gold dress materialized atop the flames, floating there.

Its unfocused, light-blue eyes scanned the surroundings before gently nodding. "Much better than last time."

The voice was otherworldly and ghostly, far from human-like.

...

"Truth be told, I'm not fond of those bedbugs either," Lumian chimed in.

The doll messenger smiled. "Right? No creature appreciates those pests!"

Lumian sensed a shared sentiment, as if both sides despised the same thing. With that, the doll messenger extended a pale-white palm, devoid of any skin texture, and the letter floated up.

Lumian watched the “doll” seize the letter and vanish like a bursting bubble. He sighed with admiration and thought, Having a messenger is so convenient… After concluding the ritual and tidying up the wooden table, Lumian returned to the bed, awaiting the messenger’s response. As time passed, the night outside deepened.

Songs echoed from the underground bar, but Lumian received no reply from Madam Magician. This made him furrow his brow. Does Madam Magician have other matters to handle and no time to read my letter?

I can’t keep waiting. I must devise other ways to protect myself…

Neither Hunter nor Provoker grant me the power to combat curses—if it is indeed a curse…

Dancer doesn’t either. Unless I genuinely pray to that concealed entity after the sacrificial dance. But how would that differ from suicide?

Ah, if I can’t pray to that hidden being, I can seek out that great existence!

I bear His seal upon me. I even obtained His permission when I claimed the boon. I’m not afraid to beseech Him again!

...

Yes, I can entreat Him to help me lift this curse.

Lumian acted swiftly, setting up the altar. Since Madam Magician hadn’t specifically outlined the ingredients for the great existence’s domain, Lumian believed that whatever he employed wouldn’t impact the final outcome, as long as it didn’t invoke other deities.

He arranged orange candles made of citrus and lavender. Two symbolized the deity, and one represented himself.

After completing the preparations, Lumian stepped back and examined the three yellowish candles. He recited in Hermes, “The Fool that doesn’t belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck…”

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Chapter 125 - 125 Struggle

Chapter 125 Struggle

As Lumian intoned the three lines of the honorific name, a faint gray fog materialized around him, radiating an unnerving aura.

The orange candle flame adopted a bluish tinge, casting a sinister, deep glow over the entire altar.

In that instant, Lumian's thoughts seemed to decelerate. He felt an itching beneath his flesh, as if something was on the verge of burrowing out.

A distant, inscrutable gaze from an unfathomable height appeared once more. Collecting himself, Lumian resumed his prayer. Adhering to Madam Magician's instructions and incorporating sacrificial knowledge from Aurore's witchcraft notebook, he recited in Hermes, "I implore you. I beseech you to lift this curse from me…"

In all honesty, Lumian yearned to request the great existence's protection for a year, shielding him from all harm. But that was clearly unattainable. He had not yet mastered the necessary Hermes phrases to counter the threat of the Montsouris ghost. Thus, he could only allude to the curse plaguing him.

As the ritual culminated, Lumian began to draw upon the power of the herbs on the altar.

In the following moment, his vision blurred, as if a seraph with twelve pairs of luminous wings materialized before him.

Descending from above, the seraph extended its arms, enveloping Lumian in an embrace.

The wings of light closed around him, enfolding him layer by layer.

Lumian shook off his stupor and noticed the bluish candle flame had reverted to its original orange hue at some unknown point.

Recalling the surreal encounter, it felt like a dream. He couldn't help but murmur to himself, Did I just see an angel? Did that great existence send one of His angels to protect me and lift this curse?

Until today, Lumian had only heard of angels in the sermons of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church. He never anticipated experiencing an angelic embrace firsthand.

According to Madam Magician, this was at least a high-level Sequence 2 entity. Even if only a fraction of its power had been projected from afar, it was still angelic in nature… Lumian felt an even deeper reverence for the enigmatic organization that employed tarot cards as their moniker and the great existence that had sealed the corruption within him.

Simultaneously, he breathed a sigh of relief.

If the Montsouris ghost had truly inflicted a curse, it should no longer be an issue. How could a ghost that dared not confront the protection granted by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's clergy and was confined to wandering beneath Trier compare to an angel?

Nevertheless, trepidation still gripped Lumian's heart. He had prayed for the curse to be lifted. What if the Montsouris ghost employed a different method of killing than a curse?

He waited until midnight, but Magician's response never came.

Unable to risk sleep, he lay on the bed, shutting his eyes just to rest.

Staying awake all night posed no challenge for him. At six in the morning, his body and mind would simultaneously reset.

This was both a curse and a blessing.

It wasn't until the latter half of the night that the cacophony of Rue Anarchie died down. Lumian discerned the faint chirping of insects in the distance and an even more remote whistle.

Abruptly, his body felt leaden, and breathing grew labored. It was as if someone had swaddled him in a blanket and weighed him down.

This isn't good! Lumian tried to rise, but he could only move his arms.

His eyes wouldn't even open!

His arms felt restrained, barely able to lift a few centimeters off the bed.

In the next moment, Lumian's body turned frigid, and his nose felt damp. It was as if he had been stuffed into a sack and hurled into the depths of a river.

His breathing faltered, his chest tightened with pain, and his thoughts decelerated.

Lumian's desperate attempts at resistance flashed through his mind-entering Cogitation and activating the black thorn symbol on his chest.

He dismissed the idea in an instant.

Firstly, he would likely lose control. Secondly, the Montsouris ghost bore no connection to the covert entity known as Inevitability. It might not be deterred by the black thorn symbol. Unless left with no alternative and teetering on the brink of death, Lumian wouldn't gamble his life on this seemingly futile method.

His lips and nose turned icy, as though an invisible hand was pressing them down. Paired with the sensation of drowning, Lumian found breathing impossible. His lungs were on the verge of bursting.

Words like Hunter, Provoker, Dancer, corruption, seal, and Fallen Mercury flickered through Lumian's mind, each forming fleeting thoughts before dissipating.

Fallen Mercury… Fallen Mercury! At last, Lumian had a revelation. He strained to shift his gloved left palm to the side.

He had already positioned the evil dirk in the most accessible location to handle potential emergencies.

A few seconds later, Lumian, gasping for air with his mouth agape, made contact with the hilt of Fallen Mercury and hoisted the pewter-black dirk.

Fallen Mercury was no longer shrouded in black cloth. The intricate patterns on its surface overlapped, inducing vertigo.

With every ounce of his strength, Lumian hoisted his shoulder, bent his arm, and plunged Fallen Mercury above his body.

There was nothing there. Not even a scratch, let alone blood!

Without hesitation, Lumian gritted his teeth and angled his arm toward his body. With a sickening pop, he drove Fallen Mercury into his left waist.

Crimson blood oozed out, staining the blade of Fallen Mercury. The phantom mercury droplet symbolizing the fate of immolation penetrated Lumian's body.

The pain shocked Lumian's oxygen-starved mind to consciousness. His vision blurred as the enigmatic river, composed of innumerable mercury symbols, emerged. This represented his own fate.

Ignoring the need for precision, Lumian cast his gaze downstream of the illusory river, toward a current on the verge of engulfing the other tributaries.

He then infused his spirituality into Fallen Mercury, allowing it to agitate the complex mercury symbol birthed from the river's entanglement.

In the next moment, Lumian saw himself lying on the bed, his face a purplish hue, teetering on the brink of death. The mercury symbols abruptly constricted, solidifying into a droplet that seeped into Fallen Mercury's blade. Almost instantaneously, Lumian felt his entire body relax. The sensations of drowning and

suffocation vanished. Simultaneously, pain enveloped him, and he couldn't help but emit a soft groan. Flames erupted from his body, searing his flesh inch by inch.

He had utilized the pain of being incinerated stored in Fallen Mercury to trade for his fate of being assaulted by a Montsouris ghost. He had successfully escaped a state where he couldn't even struggle, and the attack didn't come again! Fallen Mercury could stab others or Lumian himself, replacing an unwanted fate!

He was ignited, reliving the agony of battling the flaming beast.

Braced for the onslaught, Lumian rolled beneath the bed.

Thumping against the floor, he rolled back and forth to smother the flames engulfing him. After a while, it was unclear whether Lumian's strategy had worked, if the fire brought on by the fate exchange had run its course, or if it was a combination of both, but he was no longer consumed by the scarlet inferno. However, his clothes were in shreds, and his body was marred with charred wounds. His nose teetered on the edge of detachment, and his singed hair emitted a burnt odor. For an ordinary person or most Low-Sequence Beyonders, this was an injury beyond resuscitation-death was the only outcome.

Lumian strained to keep his eyes open and focused, fighting the urge to pass out. As time ticked away, he sensed his life rapidly ebbing.

He clung to consciousness, gasping for air. After an indeterminate period, Lumian finally heard the eerily beautiful chime of a bell.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The bell struck six in the morning, Trier time, its peal echoing through Rue Anarchie and beyond. Dawn's first light crept over the horizon.

Lumian snapped to attention, his pain abruptly gone.

His body and mind had completely reset! Phew… Lumian exhaled in relief and stood. He looked down at the tattered remnants of his once crisp linen shirt and dark pants. His skin had returned to normal.

...

Already in a financial bind, he couldn't help but sigh.

He needed new clothes-a fresh expense! Still, he'd managed to survive the Montsouris ghost's initial attack. This was likely a first in the annals of its dark legend.

From the looks of it, it's not a curse… Lumian changed into fresh clothes and stepped into the washroom to splash cold tap water on his face. Gazing into the mirror, he noticed that some of his hair had shortened, and the golden dye had faded in places.

These external changes couldn’t be reset. After washing up, Lumian returned to Room 207 and was startled to find another letter awaiting him.

The folded piece of paper lay innocuously on the wooden table.

Lumian muttered under his breath, Isn’t it too early for a reply? You didn’t sleep again last night. Did you just get home?

With a shake of his head, Lumian picked up the Magician’s response and unfolded it. The handwriting was messy, but he could just make out that it belonged to a woman. “Excellent work. Engage more with Mr. K and exhibit your wild, fanatical side until he converts you and extends an invitation to his organization.

“The Montsouris ghost is not a curse. There are three solutions for your current predicament: “First, die before it. Use the corruption within you to destroy it and avenge the fallen. “Second, trade your fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost with your dirk. Haven’t you ever considered using that blade on yourself? “Third, take refuge in a particular cathedral of a certain Church and never leave its sanctuary.”

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Chapter 126 - 126 Finding Prey

Chapter 126 Finding Prey

Lumian quickly scanned Madam Magician's message, committing the essential points to memory.

It was evident that the first and third solutions to the Montsouris ghost dilemma were jokes. The only viable option was the second: using Fallen Mercury to swap his fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost.

In all honesty, Lumian hadn't considered stabbing himself with Fallen Mercury to proactively change his destiny. Only when he was cornered by the Montsouris ghost, teetering on the brink of death, did this desperate strategy surface in his mind.

Time was of the essence, and Lumian had to act fast. He'd only managed to exchange his fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost, not completely avoiding one. He'd narrowly escaped the first crisis but still lingered in death's shadow.

Given the choice, Lumian would have still opted to exchange the fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost instead of just encountering one. The attack had already occurred, and he couldn't be sure it would cease with a mere fate swap. He needed the most reliable plan to save himself.

In simpler terms, what if the Montsouris ghost killed him and realized it had never met him and targeted the wrong person?

I need to find someone to trade the fate stored in Fallen Mercury for a better one. Then, I'll prepare thoroughly, and when I'm ready, I'll stab myself to complete the exchange. I'll seal the Montsouris ghost encounter inside Fallen Mercury… Lumian combined his experience with Madam Magician's advice and quickly devised a way to escape his predicament.

When the time came, Fallen Mercury, also known as the Cursed Blade, would cause whoever was stabbed to suffer the fate of their entire family dying, including themselves.

The drawback was the time it would take for the effect to occur.

Lumian drew Fallen Mercury from his waist, eyeing the blade wrapped in black cloth. He felt the Beyonder weapon's potential more acutely than ever.

He seriously contemplated finding experts to repair Fallen Mercury. Otherwise, the enchanted dirk would only last until year's end.

Maybe Mr. K's Beyonder Gathering could provide the resources he needed.

My suspicion is correct. Madam Magician's intention for me to meet Osta Trul is to use him to attend Mr. K's Gathering and join the secret organization behind it… Lumian donned a wide-brimmed hat and a black shirt resembling formal attire before leaving Room 207 and descending the stairs.

As a Hunter, he needed to start his search for prey.

Upon exiting Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian spotted Charlie sitting on the three-story staircase leading to the street. Pale-faced, he gazed at the sky, melancholic, with a lit cigarette in his right hand.

"What's wrong?" Lumian asked, casually sitting beside Charlie.

Charlie didn't look back. He inhaled from his cigarette and sighed.

"I feel like I've lost my soul. It's gone."

He wore a white shirt, red vest, and a black suit jacket draped over his left arm—a hotel uniform.

Lumian grinned and got to the point.

"Did you sleep with that older woman?"

Charlie turned to Lumian and emphasized, "Please call her Madame. She's only in her fifties."

He took another drag and exhaled a smoke ring.

"Did you know? She gave me a diamond necklace worth at least 1,500 verl d'or. I couldn't resist. She was so dazzling and seductive that she went straight to my heart."

"It," Lumian corrected.

Charlie smiled sheepishly.

"Madame Alice is captivating too. It's quite a feat to maintain her elegance at her age. She mentioned she'll stay in Trier for six months and can offer me 500 verl d'or a month…' As he spoke, Charlie's voice grew somber, and his eyes took on a melancholic hue.

Just as Lumian thought Charlie would sigh over his lost soul, a long exhale escaped him.

“Why can she only stay for half a year…’ Lumian patted Charlie’s shoulder, saying earnestly, “Take care of yourself.”

Charlie’s eyelids twitched.

“There’s a need for moderation. Madame Alice is far too enthusiastic. I was so exhausted last night that I didn’t even have that beautiful dream.”

Lumian chuckled and said, “You openly mentioned obtaining a diamond necklace worth 1,500 verl d’or. In Rue Anarchie, that’s enough wealth to make many people go mad.

Aren’t you afraid I’ll steal it?” Charlie laughed.

“I had to share it with someone, or I’d feel awful.

“I’ve noticed you don’t seem short on money. You’re even quite generous. You wouldn’t commit a crime for a mere 1,000 to 2,000 verl d’or.” Lumian grinned, retorting, “Is there a chance I’m pretending not to lack money to lure someone like you into lowering your guard?”

Charlie’s expression froze as the dying cigarette nearly burned his fingers. Lumian changed the subject, asking casually, “Is there anyone you despise so much that you think they deserve to die?”

Charlie snuffed out his cigarette on the stone steps, puzzled, “Why do you ask?”

He intended to pocket the extinguished cigarette butt but decided against it, tossing it aside instead.

A nearby vagrant darted over, grabbing the warm cigarette and taking a few drags. Without waiting for Lumian’s response, Charlie continued, “The person I despise most is our head attendant. You’ve no idea how detestable he is. Haha, I’ve never thought of wanting him dead, but I just wish I could hood his face and beat him up one day.

“I don’t think many people truly deserve to die. One is Baron Brignais, the market district’s Savoie Mob leader. He colludes with loan sharks, driving many to bankruptcy. A friend of mine jumped off a building in desperation. But what did that accomplish? His son vanished mysteriously, and his daughter was forced into the Salle de Bal Brise. Although she’s supposed to only sing, in reality, well…”

“That’s right. If he had the courage to kill himself, why didn’t he think of a way to kill Baron Brignais and the others?” Lumian nodded slightly. Charlie stared at Lumian, taken aback.

“Your thoughts are a little extreme.”

He added, “The second person deserving death is Margot, leader of the Poison Spur Mob. He manipulates people into swindling women new to Trier. After

bleeding them dry, he forces them into prostitution. That's how Miss Ethans in Room 8 on the fourth floor ended up in the motel. Most of the money she earns is taken by Margot. She's tried to escape several times, but she's been beaten within an inch of her life before she could leave Rue Anarchie."

Market district has quite a few mobs. No wonder it's chaotic at night… Lumian glanced at Charlie, saying, "It sounds like you sympathize with Miss Ethans."

Charlie puffed out his chest. "True Intis gentlemen empathize with ladies in tragic situations and offer help when appropriate.' Lumian tersely acknowledged. "Do you know where Margot lives?"

"I don't know." Charlie shook his head. "But he frequents the motel in the evenings, extorting money from Miss Ethans. If you hear a woman crying, shouting, and cursing on the fourth floor, that's Margot and his thugs."

Lumian nodded pensively and inquired, "Who else do you think deserves to die?" Charlie considered for a moment, replying with a contorted expression, "Monette, that Islander. He swindled me out of 10 verl d'or! "Can you imagine? I'd been unemployed for some time and hadn't found a new job yet.

That was my last bit of savings. I nearly starved to death because of him!"

"Where does he live?" Lumian asked nonchalantly.

"He was staying at the motel initially. But after know scamming me, he moved out. I don't where he went." Charlie's anger flared as he spoke. "I was waiting for him to hook me up with a job…"

Once he'd calmed down, Charlie eyed Lumian quizzically, "Why's your hair different?"

There were strands of varying lengths, gold mingled with black.

"Don't you think it's rather stylish?" Lumian asked earnestly. Charlie snorted, his expression dubious. His experience with the Idiot Instrument made him instinctively question Lumian's intentions in such matters.

After a few moments, Charlie glanced at the street vendors and waved his hand.

...

"I've got to head to the hotel. I'll see you tonight."

Lumian stayed put on the stone steps outside the hotel, waving at Charlie's retreating figure.

That afternoon, Lumian took a public carriage to Quartier du Jardin Botanique. After walking over 300 meters, he reached Mason Café.

The café occupied the ground floor of a beige four-story building near the botanical garden. Green plants twined around the building's exterior. The ground-floor shops were set back nearly a meter, with pillars supporting an outer walkway for pedestrians.

Mason's Café boasted dark green walls and large windows. Sunlight streamed through the glass, illuminating the tables and chairs outside.

Lumian, dressed in a dark suit and wide-brimmed hat, entered the café. The first thing he noticed were the intricate plant sculptures on the wall, interspersed with Intisian sentences: "Who holds supreme power in the country? The president or parliament?

[1] Adapted from the opening chapter of "Histoire Insolite des Cafés Parisiens" which was used in an early 21st-century bibliography. The original text was too lengthy, so it has been condensed.

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Chapter 127 - 127 Café

Chapter 127 Café

Lumian couldn't help but smile when he saw the "slogan" on the wall.

It reminded him of something Aurore had once said: "In Trier, the café holds a unique status. It's the birthplace of riots, the sanctuary of conspiracies, and the wellspring of scandals." Throughout Intisian history, innumerable riots had been sparked in cafés, and countless literary works and political struggles had brewed within them.

Unlike the neighboring Loen Kingdom, Intis had its own private clubs, but they were fairly exclusive or high-end, with limited access. Be they former nobles, current members of parliament, high-ranking government officials, financiers, bankers, industrialists, renowned authors, newspaper editors, military generals, or university professors, everyone enjoyed frequenting different cafés to engage in spirited conversations, presenting a more approachable side to the public. After all, the Republic's political slogan and image were built upon "freedom, equality, and fraternity."

Naturally, the cafés frequented by various social strata were vastly different, often distinguished by location, price, and style. So, when Lumian heard from Charlie that Laurent had used his mother, Mrs. Lakazan, to seek opportunities in upscale cafés, he wasn't surprised or puzzled. Many people did this, often becoming archetypes for novelists, but only a few succeeded.

At the same time, banquets and salons were all the rage in Trier. If any high society member didn't host a salon once a month, others would assume something had befallen their family or that a financial crisis had jeopardized their political future.

Aurore, who clearly adored this metropolis, stayed away partly because artists like authors, poets, painters, and sculptors seemed like tamed butterflies, fluttering about the salons of various politicians, financiers, and officials. It appeared that only by gaining their approval could the value of their work be realized.

The amalgamation of salons and cafés supplanted most club functions.

In this system, taverns, beer houses, dance halls, and cafés shared similarities, but the latter held far greater significance, leaning more towards the upper classes.

Upon seeing a customer enter, a female attendant in a grayish-white dress greeted him with a smile.

“Do you have a favorite seat, or are you meeting a friend?”

Lumian nodded.

“Cabin D.”

The female attendant led him to a secluded corner.

Beside a window, he could see a lush, tree-filled botanical garden.

“What can I get you to drink?” The female attendant presented a brown-covered wine list.

Lumian opened it, momentarily taken aback by the dazzling array of choices.

Fermo Coffee, Highlander Coffee, Reem Espresso…

Sibe Black Tea, Marquis Black Tea, West Balam Black Tea…

Fruit Slushy, Frangipani Cocktail, Ambergris Lemonade, Venus Sacred Oil…

Summer Wine, Kirsch, Rose Dew, Walnut Spirit, Orange & Lemon Wine, Cherry Spirit…

Absinthe, Fennel Absinthe, Gin, Bitter Cura?ao, Apple Brandy, Grape Dregs Brandy…

Sweetwine: Perfect Love, Barbarian Cream, Little Rose, West Pyro…

Considering he had a psychologist’s appointment later, neither alcohol nor coffee seemed fitting. Lumian thought for a moment and said, “Ambergris lemonade.”

“Four licks,” the female attendant inquired.

“Do you need cake, bread, or other food?”

“Not for now. I’ll decide when my friend arrives.” Lumian surveyed the surroundings of Mason’s Café and noted the absence of customers at this time.

The lunch crowd had cleared out by 2:30 p.m., leaving more than an hour before teatime.

Soon, the female attendant returned with a tray, placing a glass filled with a colorless liquid and a few lemons on the table. Lumian eyed the empty seat across from him, picked up his cup, and took a sip.

A sweet, elegant fragrance filled his nostrils, and the refreshing sour taste invigorated him.

As the minutes passed, Lumian noticed the wall clock nearing 3:30 p.m. He couldn't help but glance at the café entrance.

Green plants adorned the area, but no customers entered.

Just as Lumian looked away in disappointment, a soft female voice sounded from the booth behind him.

"I'm already here. Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."

Lumian assumed the woman didn't want a face-to-face conversation, so he didn't turn around. He lowered his voice and asked politely, "Good afternoon. How should I address you? Can you hear my soft voice?"

"No problem," the gentle female voice replied. "You can call me Susie."

"Hello, Madame Susie." For some reason, Lumian felt relatively calm facing this psychologist. His usual habit of inward commentary dissipated.

A familiar uneasiness washed over him a second later.

"What's wrong?" Susie, seated behind him, inquired gently.

Lumian pondered for two seconds and didn't conceal his feelings.

"I'm a little uneasy. It's an odd yet familiar sensation.

"Yes, I must have experienced something similar when I met an information broker yesterday."

Susie spoke rapidly, apologetically, "Sorry, I'm used to reading your thoughts. That might be causing your discomfort.

"Your body is infused with intense corruption and is in a delicate balance. The slightest disturbance triggers a reaction. In other words, you're highly sensitive to hidden and invisible influences, surpassing Beyonders of the same Sequence or higher."

"Is that so…" Lumian wasn't angry. In his view, a psychologist needed to read thoughts for effective treatment. Rely on words alone?

He then furrowed his brow. "Was Anthony Reid also reading my thoughts back then? I'm referring to the information broker."

"I know." Susie understood. "Where did Anthony Reid come from? What did he do before becoming an information broker?"

"He had a West Midseashire Coast accent, a retired soldier," Lumian recounted. After a brief silence, Susie said, "If he's truly from West Midseashire Coast, it's indeed possible he's a Beyonder of the Spectator pathway."

The Spectator pathway… Lumian had read about it in Aurore's Warlock notebook, but she only knew that its corresponding Sequence 9 was called the Spectator. They possessed remarkable observational abilities, deciphering true thoughts from subtle expressions and body language.

So a Sequence above the Spectator pathway is a Psychologist… As this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he heard Susie correct him.

"It's Psychiatrist."

"That sounds more reassuring." Lumian smiled. "What Sequence is Anthony Reid?" After learning the other's pathway, he felt Anthony Reid should have recognized him and sensed his anxiety, concern, and attempts at intimidation.

"According to your description, he's at least a Sequence 8," Susie concluded.

Lumian smirked. "If he's really a Psychiatrist, that's interesting. He didn't even treat the aftereffects of his battlefield trauma."

"It's not unusual. When a Psychiatrist suffers severe psychological trauma, it's incredibly difficult for them to recover alone. They often need the help of another Psychiatrist, and treating a Psychiatrist is far riskier than usual.

...

One misstep can result in the infection of the patient's mental illness," Susie explained succinctly.

As the conversation shifted and the atmosphere lightened, Lumian gradually relaxed, no longer feeling uneasy or anxious.

He took the initiative to say, "Shall we begin the treatment?"

"Talking is part of the treatment." Susie's gentle voice hinted at a smile.

Realizing that the first stage of the treatment was simply conversation, Lumian eased further. He leaned back against the booth partition and asked, puzzled, "I know it was a dream, but there are many details I can't comprehend.

"Since it's my dream, how can I know the various abilities of the three official investigators? Why am I so familiar with the unique abilities of the padre, the shepherd, and company?"

Susie's tone was warm as she replied, "The three official investigators were forcibly drawn into your dream. It's as if their subconscious came close to yours, in a semi-open state.

"They would actively participate in the dream, revealing all sorts of information they know. Even if they only think about it, your subconscious can sense it." In other words, with Ryan, Leah, and Valentine's involvement, certain parts of the

dream are created through “interaction?” Their responses are a collective creation of my subconscious and theirs, adhering to unspoken rules? Lumian considered this as he pondered previously unresolved questions.

Susie’s voice remained steady as she continued, “You must have some suspicions about why you know the abilities of the evil god’s followers, right? But you’re just unwilling to confront them?”

At this, Lumian’s eyelids twitched involuntarily.

“Based on the information Madam Magician provided, most of Guillaume Bénet and Pierre Berry’s abilities stem from the evil god’s Sequence, Contractee. So, it’s impossible to predict their abilities beforehand. It depends on which creature they’ve signed a contract with,”

...

Susie gently analyzed. “In other words, we can rule out the possibility that your subconscious obtained corresponding knowledge from the seal’s corruption. Without a knowledge base, you couldn’t imagine those abilities nothing. They’re not imaginary.” The woman’s tone suddenly turned grave.

from “Clearly, at some point before Cordu was destroyed, you saw Guillaume Bénet, Pierre the others use their abilities. Moreover, you were neither harmed nor Berry, and traumatized. Otherwise, it would have manifested in the dream.

“From the dream’s analysis, what truly left a scar on you was Pualis and company’s actions. “How do you think you witnessed those evil god followers using their powers?” Susie’s words were like sharp arrows piercing Lumian’s memories, making the sturdy barrier waver.

Lumian’s face twisted slightly. Amidst excruciating pain, he saw images surface from the depths of his memories.

It was the third floor of the administrator’s castle.

The walls were adorned with pale, translucent faces, but the fighters were no longer Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. Instead, it was Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and Sybil Berry!

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Chapter 128 - 128 In the Dream

Chapter 128 In the Dream

Blood-red flowers bloomed on the pitch-black vines hanging from the ceiling, sealing off the third floor of the castle.

Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and Sybil Berry fought off the ‘midwife’ and her accomplices as they charged towards the tower.

A series of fragmented scenes flashed through Lumian’s mind.

In a tower filled with bird-clawed infants, the invisible Guillaume Bénet touched the midwife’s shoulder with the help of Shepherd Pierre Berry. The midwife exploded as if a bomb had been planted inside her.

Though Sybil Berry had been killed by the lady’s maid, she was reborn in the other woman’s body and took control of it.

Floating in the air, Louis Lund gave birth to a child in the room.

Unfazed, Louis Lund teamed up with Administrator Béost to subdue Shepherd Pierre Berry.

In the wilderness leading deep into the mountains, the padre, Guillaume Bénet, was surrounded by countless undead in linen garments…

Lumian’s face contorted in pain. These memories felt like a sharp weapon piercing his soul. Extracting them would do more harm, making him instinctively resist recalling them further.

Eventually, the scenes faded, and Lumian panted heavily.

“How was it? Did you find anything?” Susie’s voice was gentle, as if inquiring about today’s breakfast.

Lumian pondered and replied, “I remember the battle between the padre and Madame Pualis’s subordinates. The scene was chaotic and fragmented…

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m watching in person, and at times from afar via certain means…”

This left him deeply puzzled about his position and role in these events.

At times, he seemed to be part of the two groups, embroiled in the conflict. Other times, he appeared to be a mere bystander, unconnected to either side.

Susie asked, leading him on, “Besides that, is there anything else you don’t understand about the situation in your memory?”

Lumian said as he recalled, “I don’t think I saw Madame Pualis… She only appeared when the padre was surrounded by a horde of undead in the wilderness…

“The padre and his allies seemed drained after dealing with Louis Lund, Cathy, Béost, the midwife, and Madame Pualis’s subordinates. If Madame Pualis had joined, I don’t think they could have won…

“Why did Madame Pualis willingly give up and leave Cordu without stopping the padre and his allies…”

“Not willingly, but forcibly sent away,” Susie corrected him. “The ritual in your dream to send the Spring Elf away should be about sending Pualis away. The Spring Elf symbolizes a bountiful harvest, the end of a harsh winter, and the budding of new life. It’s very similar to the abilities displayed by Pualis’s group.”

“That’s even stranger…” Lumian’s voice grew pained as he clenched his fists, feeling unable to remember any more.

Susie said gently, “If you don’t want to recall, don’t. Recovering all your memories isn’t something that can be achieved in one session of therapy. Take your time. There’s no rush.”

Phew… Lumian slowly exhaled a sigh of relief, his body relaxing.

After he had calmed down for nearly a minute, Susie said, “You can sleep and see if you can find more answers in your dreams.”

At first, the Psychiatrist’s voice was gentle in Lumian’s ears, but then it became increasingly ethereal, as if it had receded and entered another world.

His eyelids grew heavier and heavier until they finally closed.

Lumian’s eyes snapped open to the familiar ceiling above him.

He bolted upright, taking in the reclining chair, the wooden table by the window, the small bookshelf, and the wardrobe with its full-length mirror.

This was his bedroom, his home in Cordu.

For a few seconds, Lumian stared blankly before leaping out of bed and sprinting from the room.

He flung open Aurore's bedroom door and found the desk littered with manuscripts, papers, fountain pens, ink bottles, and other items, just as he remembered. He noticed the chair with the pillow was empty.

His gaze shifted to the vacant bed before slowly retracting.

Quietly, he closed the door and moved to the next room.

No familiar figure awaited him in the study either.

Lumian raced downstairs.

He dashed through Cordu Village, arriving at the entrance of the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.

Not a single villager crossed his path. Every house was eerily silent.

Gazing up at the onion-like dome, Lumian strode into the cathedral.

The altar had been altered, adorned with tulips, lilacs, and other flowers. A black thorn symbol was etched into it, seemingly with liquid flowing on its surface.

Still, nobody was here.

Lumian searched the padre's room before heading to the basement.

Piles of bones and sheepskin lay around, just as in his previous dream, but the altar in the middle remained untouched.

He examined it cautiously but felt no burning sensation in his chest.

Realizing this was a dream, the power representing the past, present, and future seemed to have vanished.

Having gained nothing, Lumian stood by the underground altar, deep in thought. He then dashed up the stairs, out the side door, and into the nearby cemetery. Guided by the memories of his previous dream, he quickly located the tomb where the owl had flown in. Crouching down, he pushed open the stone slab sealing the entrance. Without hesitation, Lumian descended the stairs, traversed the passageway, and found the black coffin in the shadowy tomb.

No owl was present, nor was there another Lumian. Only the faint light seeping in from outside illuminated the scene.

In a daze, Lumian turned his attention to the black coffin.

The lid had already slid to the side, revealing its contents.

Hesitating for a moment, Lumian recalled Aurore nearly losing control in his dream when she spied on the dead Warlock's corpse in the coffin.

Two or three seconds later, his expressionless steps carried him forward, approaching the black coffin. He cast his gaze inside.

A corpse quickly appeared before his eyes.

With golden hair cascading down its sides and eyes tightly shut, the corpse's pale-white face was adorned with a light blue dress.

It was Aurore!

Aurore lay in the coffin of the dead Warlock!

...

Lumian's pupils dilated, his face contorting with horror.

The scene before him fractured, crumbling inch by inch.

Lumian's eyes snapped open, his expression a mix of bewilderment and dread.

"What did you see?" Susie's voice echoed in his ears.

Lumian replied in a distant tone, "I saw Aurore lying in the coffin of the deceased Warlock… "How can this be…"

Susie reassured him, "This is more symbolic.

"Consider this: there's no real Warlock legend, and in the dream, the story you subconsciously created transformed your and Aurore's home into the Warlock's former residence. Aurore knows nothing about this or the legend. "Her loss of control was because she wanted to see the Warlock's corpse in the coffin clearly."

"So, the Warlock who died in the legend represents Aurore. What does the owl symbolize? What does the entire story signify?"

Questions flooded Lumian's mind, each like a sharp blade tearing at his head. Lumian instinctively raised his hands to clutch his head.

"You might need to recover more memories before you can analyze it. Moreover, sometimes, multiple layers of symbolism exist in a mixed state," Susie said gently. "That's enough for today's treatment. Your subconscious is already resisting. Continuing may backfire and harm your mental state.

Would you like the second treatment in two weeks or a month?" Lumian didn't hesitate.

...

"Two weeks from now." Susie paused for a few seconds before adding, "Lastly, I must remind you that you have a strong tendency for self-destruction."

“Self-destruction…” Lumian repeated the words, his expression unchanged. Susie’s voice carried warmth again. “I understand why this happened, and I don’t want to forcibly eliminate it. Unless you’re willing to let me erase all memories at the root of the problem, every treatment will only alleviate, not eradicate it.

“I just want to remind you that Aurore loves living and life.

“She has many unfulfilled wishes. She wants to see you attend university. She wants to travel to Trier as an ordinary person for a while. She wants to find clues about her home. She wants to resolve her issues with her parents. She wants to savor all of Trier’s delicacies, every concert, and experience every art exhibition.

attend “She’s one step away from complete death. If she’s conscious, I don’t think she’d give up. She’s like someone who’s fallen into an abyss, clinging to the cliff edge with one hand. If even you give up, no one will pull her up again.” Lumian’s expression shifted, but he couldn’t show any defined emotions.

It seemed he had forgotten how to smile or cry.

Susie didn’t pressure him to respond. She sighed softly and said, “Many times, suppressing pain and despair isn’t helpful. Humans need to vent and relieve stress. “Alright, that’s it for today. We’ll meet again for the second treatment, same time in two weeks.”

Lumian closed his eyes.

“Thank you, Madame Susie.”

Susie didn’t reply, as if she had already left.

After more than ten seconds, Lumian slowly exhaled and opened his eyes.

He instinctively glanced outside Mason’s Café and saw a golden retriever with a small brown bag vanishing around the corner.

A female figure appeared to be beside the dog.

Lumian lingered for another ten minutes before finishing the remaining ambergris lemonade. He stepped out of Mason’s Café and made his way to the nearest public carriage stop.

A green double-decker carriage pulled up, inviting passengers to board.

Lumian paid 30 coppets and found a window seat, his gaze distant.

“Read all about it! Only 11 coppets each!” A child in old clothes approached the window, hoisting a stack of newspapers in his hand. Self-destruct… live… self-destruct… live… Lumian’s mind replayed the psychiatrist’s words. He felt like a walking corpse, oblivious to the newsboy.

Suddenly, he noticed the newspaper's title— Novel Weekly.

That's right, it's Sunday… Lumian snapped back to reality. He handed the child two 5-coppet copper coins and one 1-coppet copper coin, opened the window, and grabbed a copy of Novel Weekly.

Unfolding the newspaper, Lumian began to read, illuminated by the bright sunlight streaming through the window.

As the carriage slowly rolled forward, a message caught Lumian's eye: "Obituary: "Our eternal friend, the renowned bestselling author, Aurore Lee, has been confirmed by our editorial team to have passed away in an accident in April…"

Lumian's gaze froze, his hands trembling.

Abruptly, he lowered his head, raised the newspaper, and shielded his face with it. A wet mark materialized on the newspaper's surface in the afternoon sun.

More and more wet marks emerged, merging into one splatter.

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Chapter 129 - 129 Neighbor

Chapter 129 Neighbor

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Lumian tossed the wrinkled newspaper onto the table and slumped onto the bed.

After a few moments, he collapsed onto the mattress. Exhaustion coursed through his veins, making it nearly impossible to resist the urge to sleep.

He reset his body and mental state each day, but never his mind.

Too tired to bother undressing, he kicked off his leather shoes and closed his eyes.

Lumian slept deeply, dreamless.

The acrid scent of sulfur roused him from his sleep. The sun was still setting outside the window.

Lumian turned his head to gaze at the glass window, tinged with a golden-red hue, and whispered sarcastically, “Could it be that I’ve slept for a day and a night?”

It was clearly impossible; he always woke up automatically at 6 a.m.

Though the obituary had helped vent the sorrow in his heart, Lumian still felt somewhat despondent.

He knew that grief wouldn’t simply vanish, and pain would inevitably resurface. He had to maintain a stable mental state and face his emotions without spiraling into self-destruction.

As for extreme, mad, and self-destructive tendencies, he accepted that these were inevitable, as long as they weren’t severe.

I have to undergo psychiatric treatment regularly in the future. Otherwise, I’ll completely lose my mind before I complete my revenge and find a way to revive Aurore. Lumian sighed and got out of bed.

He picked up the wrinkled Novel Weekly again and studied the obituary on the front page, seeking to reawaken the familiar pain in his heart.

Then, Lumian noticed an issue.

This paper was from last week.

The paperboy had sold him an outdated newspaper!

Impossible. It's impossible for a paperboy to keep a newspaper copy that can't be sold… Lumian furrowed his brow, finding this odd coincidence inexplicable.

He carefully recalled something that Psychiatrist Susie had said: "Many times, suppressing pain and despair isn't helpful. Humans need to vent and relieve stress…"

Suddenly, Lumian understood.

This was part of his psychiatric treatment!

Madame Susie had first identified my unstable mental state and strong self-destructive tendencies. Then, she used the hope of reviving Aurore as an initial counsel. Finally, while I wallowed in my pain, she arranged for the paperboy to deliver a week-old obituary. She shattered my defenses with cold, hard facts, allowing me to release the pain and despair I had buried deep inside… Lumian mused silently.

Realizing this, he was grateful for encountering a highly skilled and professional psychiatrist. Without her, escaping his mental quagmire would have been nearly impossible.

As Lumian's gaze drifted, he noticed a few bedbugs scurrying into his room.

His keen sense of smell told him the sulfur in the neighboring room had been lit to repel the bedbugs, but the vermin mostly fled elsewhere.

Lumian chuckled at the thought of him and his neighbor inadvertently "attacking" each other by driving the bedbugs into each other's rooms. He slipped on his leather shoes and strode out of Room 207, heading for Room 206.

On the second floor of Auberge du Coq Doré, nestled in an alley behind Rue Anarchie, a washroom connected rooms 201 to 204. Opposite Room 204 was another washroom, with rooms 205 to 208 on the other side. A sizable balcony graced both sides of the corridor, so the third, fourth, and fifth floors each held ten rooms and two washrooms.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Lumian rapped his knuckles on Room 206's door.

"Who is it?" A slightly flustered voice called from inside.

"I'm from Room 207 next door," Lumian replied, grinning. "I want to get to know my neighbor."

Moments later, the door creaked open, revealing a lanky young man before Lumian.

Barely 1.7 meters tall, the man wore a faded linen shirt and black suspenders. Oversized black-framed glasses perched on his nose, and his unkempt, greasy brown hair looked as if it hadn't been washed for days. His dark-brown eyes betrayed his wariness.

"What can I do for you?" the man inquired.

Flashing a smile, Lumian extended his right hand.

"I'll be staying here for a while, so I figured I should get to know my neighbors. What's your name?"

The young man hesitated before reaching out and shaking Lumian's hand.

"Gabriel, and yours?"

"Ciel." Lumian glanced into Room 206, feigning curiosity. "Why are you burning sulfur now? It's already evening-time to head out for food."

Gabriel adjusted his glasses and offered a wry smile.

"I'm a playwright, and I'm planning to write all night."

"An author?" Lumian raised his hand to his chin, abandoning his plan to play a prank on his neighbor to break the ice. Gabriel clarified, "Playwright, actually. I specialize in writing plays for various theaters."

"Sounds impressive," Lumian praised sincerely. "I admire people who can write stories. My idol is an author."

Gabriel, flattered by the praise and Lumian's genuine expression, scratched his messy brown hair and sighed.

"This line of work isn't as glamorous as it seems. I poured my heart into my last script, which I think rivals the classics, but no theater manager will give it a chance.

"So I take on requests from tabloids, churning out trite stories to pay rent and avoid starvation. Right now, I'm rushing to finish one of those manuscripts. The editors just want steamy scenes with the female characters -that's what their readers crave…" Perhaps it was because he had triggered a scar in his heart, Gabriel was driven by an urge to share his struggles.

Lumian listened intently before responding with sincerity, "I've read many authors' biographies and interviews. Most of them experienced hardship, living in cheap hotels or cramped attics. I believe you'll find someone who appreciates your work and helps you become a renowned playwright.' Gabriel removed his glasses and rubbed his face. "You're only the second person to encourage me. Everyone else mocks my dreams, accusing me of being out of touch with reality." If it weren't for the fact that you share a profession similar to Aurore's, I would've

mocked you too. And my mockery would be worse than theirs… Lumian thought, before asking curiously, “Who was the first person to encourage you?”

“Miss Séraphine, from Room 309,” Gabriel replied, glancing at the ceiling. “She’s a figure model. I haven’t seen her in a few days. She might’ve moved out.”

The same figure model Ruhr and his wife mentioned? Lumian nodded and extended an invitation.

“How about a drink at the bar?”

Gabriel was sorely tempted but ultimately declined.

“Another time. I have to submit my manuscript tomorrow.”

“Alright.” Lumian waved and returned to his room.

Peering out the window at the bustling Rue Anarchie, Lumian resolved to find a restaurant and indulge in Trier’s culinary delights.

Just then, a shrill female voice echoed from upstairs: “You bastard! You pig!

...

“Your mother spawned you with a devil…”

The cursing halted abruptly, as if silenced by force. Lumian’s heart raced as he flung open the window.

“If you’re so fond of women, why not go to your mother?

This time, Lumian pinpointed the voice to the fourth floor.

Miss Ethans, the one forced into prostitution?

He recalled Charlie’s description. That also meant Margot-the leader of the Poison Spur Mob-had arrived with his henchmen to collect their dues.

In the Intis Republic, there were two types of prostitutes: the registered ones in places like Rue de la Muraille and Rue de Breda, and the unregistered, illegal ones. The latter, who neither paid taxes nor could do their business without the authorities stepping in, outnumbered the former by ten or even twenty times.

After some contemplation, Lumian donned a dark suit and positioned himself between Rooms 202 and 203. A staircase led to the next floor.

He retrieved the cheap cologne he’d purchased from Bigorre, intending to pour it on the wooden steps for Margot and his henchmen to tread upon as they passed.

Unsure when the Montsouris ghost’s next attack would strike, Lumian was desperate to find his prey and complete the fate exchange. a brief moment, he

abandoned the idea of directly pouring the cologne, opting instead for a more discreet approach to avoid detection by After any Beyonder powers.

Lumian loosened the lid and feigned a clumsy slip of his hand, failing to grip the thick glass bottle securely.

...

With a clang, the cologne bottle hit the bottom step, and some liquid seeped out, the pungent fragrance filling the air.

Lumian crouched down, feigning frustration, picked up the bottle, and screwed the lid back on.

He smeared the spilled cologne with his palm, rubbing it against his body to not waste it.

Soon, most of the liquid had evaporated, and the night breeze pouring into the balcony swept away the lingering scent. Only then did Lumian retreat to Room 207. He concealed himself by leaning against the door frame while keeping an eye on the stairwell.

After more than ten minutes, footsteps sounded from above.

By now, the cologne in the corridor had significantly dissipated.

A thin man led four others down the stairs.

With closely cropped yellow hair, single-lidded blue eyes, a prominent nose bridge, thin lips, and faint scars on his face, the man suspected to be Margot wore a red shirt and a dark leather vest. His hands were tucked into his milky-white pants as he descended step by step.

A bulge on his left waist hinted at a hidden weapon, and his feet were clad in strapless leather boots.

Suddenly, the man frowned and deftly leaped over the two steps and a section of the second-floor corridor tainted with cologne. The three male thugs trailing him failed to detect anything unusual and trampled the remaining traces of the scent. Lumian’s heart pounded at the sight. Is Margot acutely sensitive to smells, with a strong aversion to being contaminated by peculiar odors?

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Chapter 130 - 130 Tracking

Chapter 130 Tracking

Lumian recognized Margot's actions all too well.

He would have done the same!

Then, he remembered Aurore mentioning that Beyonders from the Hunter pathway were relatively common in the Intis Republic. Lumian suspected that Margot might also be a Beyonder from the Hunter pathway, but he couldn't determine his Sequence.

A mob boss wouldn't have a high Sequence unless necessary… If Margot is truly a Hunter pathway Beyonder, he shouldn't surpass Sequence 7. Furthermore, the likelihood of him being a Pyromaniac is slim. Leah and Valentine, only at Sequence 7, are already considered elite investigators. Could they be inferior to a high-ranking thug who patrols the territory, abducts women, and bullies prostitutes? Lumian pondered silently as he stepped back and averted his gaze.

Although it seemed improbable that Margot had reached or even exceeded Sequence 7, Lumian dared not be careless.

What if his Sequence title was something like 'Scoundrel' which required him to act like one?

What if the Poison Spur Mob was more complex than it appeared, merely an extension of a secret organization or underground cult with ample resources, deliberately avoiding ostentation to evade official scrutiny?

The odds were slim, but lacking information and relevant mystical knowledge, Lumian had to remain vigilant. He couldn't eliminate the possibilities or gauge their likelihood.

In the second-floor corridor, the man suspected to be Margot—clad in a red shirt and black vest with his hands in his pockets- turned to his three subordinates.

Frowning slightly, he seemed puzzled and mildly displeased by their unnecessary contact with the cologne.

He glanced at the ground and sniffed.

The cologne wasn't confined to the stairwell; it brazenly led to Room 207. Moreover, the bottom step bore fresh marks of being struck by a light, small object.

In an instant, the man presumed to be Margot reconstructed the scene in his mind based on the environmental clues: The tenant in Room 207 might have visited the washroom or a neighbor. On their way back, they intended to apply cologne but dropped the bottle on the stairs. Then, they spread the cologne on their body, leaving only faint traces.

This was consistent with the mindset of Auberge du Coq Doré's tenants.

The man thought to be Margot dismissed his suspicions and instructed his three subordinates, "Remember to change your shoes when you return to Salle de Gristmill."

"Alright, Boss," the trio replied almost in unison.

It wasn't surprising; they were frequently asked to do something similar.

Salle de Gristmill… From Room 207, Lumian overheard their conversation and grew increasingly certain that the man suspected to be a Hunter pathway Beyonder was Margot. After chatting with Charlie that morning, he strolled around Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, conversing with vendors and bar patrons. He learned that Salle de Gristmill at 3 Rue Anarchie was one of the Poison Spur Mob's strongholds.

Only when Margot and his crew reached the bottom did Lumian don his wide-brimmed hat and leisurely exit the room. He trailed the lingering scent of cologne, venturing deeper into the street.

Seven or eight minutes later, he arrived at Salle de Gristmill. The faint odor of cheap cologne confirmed that Margot and his subordinates had returned.

Salle de Gristmill lacked the grand statue and inscriptions of Salle de Bal Brise. It merely occupied a section of the street and featured a golden-hued lobby.

Gas lamps encased by glass covers and black crossed bars on four stone pillars illuminating the entrance hall dispelled the evening's darkness.

At that moment, the dance hall buzzed with activity. Lumian heard singing, raucous laughter, and the strumming of instruments before stepping inside.

The layout resembled Salle de Bal Brise, with a dance floor in the center surrounded by small round tables and chairs. A low wooden platform at the front held a sultry woman.

Clad in a provocative short white top, her bra's row of bows was clearly visible. A black mole adorned her lips, and her brownish-yellow hair was swept up in a bun. Her makeup emphasized her large, deep-set blue eyes, creating a seductive, decadent allure.

Softly crooning, she occasionally kicked her right leg. Her cream-colored, fluffy knee-length skirt enticed patrons to try peeking beneath it.

“The consulting physician has an alluring air, “He’ll first prepare by pushing up his sleeves with care, “It takes me back to my initial romance, “But this fine medic, he stands apart with just a glance, “He locates the sweet spot with such finesse and speed, “Discerning, my love, his touch is skilled indeed.”

Amid the suggestive and captivating performance, Lumian approached the bar counter and asked the bartender, “What’s there to eat?”

The bartender smiled and inquired, “How about Rouen Meatloaf? Or do you prefer standard fare like sausages, bread, and smoked meat?” Lumian, already aware of the Trieriens’ fondness for meatloaf, nodded. “Then, two servings of Rouen Meatloaf.”

“And a glass of apple punch? It can counteract the richness of the meatloaf.” The bartender sensed a generous customer when Lumian didn’t inquire about the price and suggested a slightly pricier drink.

Punch was a fruit juice cocktail. Lumian smiled. “Sure.”

With nearly 200 verl d’or remaining, Lumian didn’t need to be overly frugal with his food and drink. In any case, scrimping wouldn’t be enough to cover the outstanding payment for information broker Anthony Reid.

“3 licks for each Rouen Meatloaf and 12 licks for the apple punch,” the bartender quickly quoted the price.

Lumian nodded and pulled out a verl d’or silver coin, adorned with a small angel relief and a diffused line on the surface, tossing it to the bartender.

After pocketing the two 5 coppet bronze coins in change, he waited patiently.

By then, the female singer on stage had finished her performance, and the band played a slightly intense drumbeat.

Customers flocked to the dance floor, swaying to the rhythm, releasing the day’s pressure, fatigue, and pain.

A man sitting nearby grinned at his companion and said, “I love this atmosphere so much. I wonder who invented this kind of gyrating dance. It’s far more appealing than the old quadrille! Can you imagine? I’d often have a partner in my arms, only to wait ages for my turn to dance. My enthusiasm would’ve cooled by then.”

The quadrille, or square dancing, involved four men and women forming a square and dancing to a violinist’s performance before circling each other. Another man chuckled and said, “I still prefer the Can-can and Striptease.” The Can-can, popular in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge, featured high kicks and landing splits as signature moves. When women lined up in short skirts and stockings, kicking high, cheers and thrown coins often followed.

Of course, it was a technically demanding dance. A skilled dancer needed to kick their leg as high as their nose or close to their ears. Lumian absorbed the surrounding sounds, occasionally glancing at the stairs where the cheap cologne scent vanished. Soon, two thick meatloaves and a dreamy, transparent alcoholic beverage with a red top and floating ice cubes arrived.

Lumian sipped the apple punch, refreshed by the sweetness, faint tartness, and smoothness of the alcohol. The ice's coldness invigorated him.

He then bit into the Rouen Meatloaf, unable to resist the blend of unfermented dough's sweetness, minced meat's flavor, oil's aroma, and spices' kick.

After devouring a whole meatloaf, he sipped the apple punch to cleanse his palate. Post-dinner, Lumian clutched his drink, listening to the girl's singing and watching the dance floor crowd.

The feverish atmosphere seemed to affect him as he occasionally swayed to the rhythm at the dimly lit bar counter.

Each time, Lumian would steal a glance at the stairs, monitoring Margot and his subordinates' movements. It was midnight when Margot-clad in a red shirt, leather vest, and sporting short, vertical, light-yellow hair-descended the stairs with three thugs and exited Salle de Gristmill.

Aware that the other party might be a Hunter pathway Beyonder, Lumian didn't follow immediately. He was prepared to lose them since the gang's leather shoes, once soaked in cheap cologne, had been changed. Relying on his sense of smell to track them from a distance was no longer an option. Still, he harbored some hope. He'd noticed that most dance hall customers were too engrossed and frenzied, occasionally spilling alcohol on the floor, creating wet spots from the stairs to the exit.

Swaying to the rhythm, Lumian observed from the corner of his eye that Margot consistently avoided the damp ground. This further solidified his belief that Margot was a Hunter pathway Beyonder.

As for Margot's three subordinates, despite their attempts to dodge the wet areas, their limited observation skills and the dim gas wall lamp lighting led to their feet or heels inevitably getting wet.

For those frequenting bars and dance halls, it was unavoidable. Margot had grown numb to it, not considering it an issue or giving it much thought.

Almost a minute after they left, Lumian rose from the bar counter and stepped out of Salle de Gristmill.

With few pedestrians on the streets, only the occasional drunkard's singing and cursing broke the silence. Ruined gas street lamps cast moonlight providing the main illumination.

a feeble light, with the sky's crimson The four gas wall lamps at the dance hall entrance allowed Lumian to spot numerous Some had long since faded, wet footprints. while others were fresh.

Three sets of footprints appeared in close proximity and consistently at the same time. Upon closer inspection, Lumian discovered a faint, difficult-to-notice set of footprints without any wet stains leading the way. Lumian chuckled, whispering to himself, "Constantly hanging out with fools and vermin will only bring you harm."

...

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Chapter 131 - 131 Night Fight

Chapter 131 Night Fight

Under the crimson moon's glow, a gas street lamp illuminated the area from a distance. Lumian identified the footprints and followed them at a measured pace.

Before long, the wet spots dried up entirely, ceasing to provide clues. However, Lumian had memorized the size, sole patterns, and gait characteristics of the four sets of footprints, ensuring he wouldn't confuse them with others.

Even so, tracking them proved challenging. Unlike the ruins of Cordu Village, thousands of people traversed Rue Anarchie and its surroundings daily, leaving countless overlapping footprints that obscured and destroyed each other, making it difficult to pinpoint a target.

Compounding the challenge, vendors littered the streets with trash, and the terrible environment created other distractions. At times, Lumian felt like he was searching for a drop of water in the ocean.

Fortunately, it was midnight, and few pedestrians were out. Most were alcoholics, whose distinct smell and staggered footprints Lumian could dismiss at a glance.

Additionally, Margot and his crew hadn't been gone long, so many traces remained undamaged. Lumian barely managed to keep up.

Occasionally, due to the environment or Margot's caution, the footprints would abruptly vanish. But Lumian remained undeterred. He composed himself, searching forward, left, and right over considerable distances for new traces. Through trial and error, he eventually found the footprints he sought.

Thus, Lumian tracked them to Rue du Rossignol in the market district, stopping in front of a five-story apartment building far from several cheap dance halls.

Margot and his subordinates' footprints led inside.

Upon careful examination, Lumian confirmed that the three thugs had eventually left and walked in different directions.

In other words, Margot was the only one remaining in an apartment room.

He doesn't need his subordinates' protection, confident in his own strength… Lumian silently mused, growing more certain that his target was a Beyonder.

He surveyed the pitch-black corridor, considering how a Hunter might handle corresponding traces before returning to their actual residence. He suspected that even with a carbide lamp and meticulous searching, locating Margot would be near-impossible, and he might even fall into a prearranged trap.

After some contemplation, Lumian formulated a preliminary plan. He averted his gaze and headed to the adjacent street.

Before long, he encountered a staggering drunk man in his twenties who could barely walk.

As the man reached a malfunctioning gas street lamp and began to vomit, Lumian lowered his hat and approached. In a hushed tone, he said, “I want to buy your shirt for 1.5 verl d’or.” The drunkard’s initial reaction was to question whether he was so intoxicated that he was hallucinating.

He wore a gray-blue tweed shirt he’d purchased from a cheap clothing store in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman for only 1 verl d’or. Now, someone wanted to spend 1.5 verl d’or, or 30 licks, on this old garment he’d worn for two years!

Am I crazy, or is this guy crazy? The drunkard strained to look up at his counterpart, but the dim light only revealed a shadowy figure in the darkness.

The next moment, two cold coins appeared in his hand.

Instinctively, the drunkard weighed the coins and felt the patterns etched into the metal.

He belched and asked, “Why do you want to buy it?”

“If you’re unwilling, I’ll find someone else.” Lumian feigned taking back the silver coins.

Without further questioning, the drunkard grumbled and slowly removed his coat, emptying the pockets.

As Lumian departed with the clothes, the drunkard looked up with difficulty and waved his hand.

“Haha, lunatic. Lunatic who gives money…

Blargh…”

By the time Lumian returned to the apartment block on Rue du Rossignol, he had changed into a dark-blue cap, a gray-blue tweed coat, faded pants, and a pair of worn, dirty leather shoes.

In addition to items he would use later, he had spent a total of 12 verl d’or.

Lumian glanced at the unlit apartment and suddenly found himself bewildered.

Why do I have to target a Beyonder like Margot?

His three subordinates were hardly innocent, and they were clearly weak. They didn't know how to cover their tracks, so dealing with them shouldn't be much harder than killing a chicken…

The fate of being attacked by the Montsouris ghost wouldn't discriminate!

Why was I fixated on hunting Margot?

I wasn't like this before. When necessary, I could be ruthless, and I could keep things simple. I wouldn't burden myself unnecessarily…

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian's lips curled into a faint smile. He realized he had 'instinctively' chosen more dangerous prey because it appeared more challenging, making him feel more at ease and carefree.

Lumian gazed at his left chest concealed beneath his clothes, suspecting this change resulted from the corruption within his body. After a few seconds of silence, he suppressed a soft chuckle. "From the looks of it, I'm a little crazy…" He didn't plan on changing his target; it was as if he could already smell the stench of blood. This was both a blessing and a curse. With his cap pulled low, Lumian carried a pile of items and circled to the rear of the target apartment.

He arranged the fatty meat, flammable sofa stuffing, and other items against the wall, creating a fireproof barrier around them.

Next, Lumian struck a match and tossed it onto the pile. The sparks rapidly spread across the most combustible materials, quickly growing and consuming everything around them. Black smoke billowed.

As the dense smoke enveloped the area, Lumian shouted, "Fire! Fire!"

He then raced back to the front of the apartment and retreated into the shadows of a nearby corner.

His plan was simple: since he didn't know which room Margot occupied or what traps he had set, he'd force Margot to reveal himself! If Margot were a Pyromaniac, he'd certainly sense that the flames and smoke below couldn't cause a real inferno. His reaction would differ greatly, allowing Lumian to determine Margot's Sequence and decide whether to proceed or abort the plan.

and With the rising smoke, flickering flames, Lumian's cries, the apartment's tenants and those from neighboring buildings rushed down the stairs to the street.

As the fire wasn't large and the smoke hadn't penetrated the apartment, no one risked jumping out.

Remaining silent, Lumian focused intently on the apartment entrance while others 'replaced' him to shout and search for the fire's origin.

Seconds later, a figure leaped from a second-floor window, landing with ease. It was Margot-dressed in a red shirt and long milky-white pants! Relying on his Beyonder abilities and living on a lower floor, Margot hadn't taken the stairs like the other tenants. Instead, he jumped out the window.

Upon landing, he glanced back at the apartment, realizing the fire wasn't serious at all. There had been no need for him to jump out, making him appear panicked and foolish.

In that instant, Margot spotted a figure wearing a peaked cap and gray-blue shirt emerge from a corner.

The figure, head lowered, pointed at Margot and laughed. "Look, this guy is such an idiot!" Margot's emotions erupted with a fury.

His eyes tinted red as he lunged at the man mocking him.

He was fast, but the figure was faster. He had already turned and darted into the nearest alley.

All Margot wanted was to teach the guy a lesson and chase him down.

The pair raced into the dark, deserted alley, one tailing the other.

Tap! Tap! Tap! The figure sprinted to a barricade and vaulted over it with a push from his right hand.

Upon landing, he saw the figure stop and turn around.

...

The moment he landed, he saw the figure stop and turn around.

Under the crimson moonlight, Margot saw the face beneath the dark-blue cap. It was swathed in layers of white bandages, revealing only nostrils, eyes, and ears. The figure's left hand was similarly wrapped, gripping a sinister-looking, pewter-black dirk. Margot's pupils widened, and his heart skipped a beat.

He instantly realized he had fallen prey to some kind of Provocation.

Suppressing his unease, Margot drew the black revolver from his waist.

He aimed at Lumian and activated Provocation.

"With that knife? Idiot, this is the age of the gun!"

Bang!

Margot pulled the trigger, sending a bullet straight for Lumian's head.

Lumian suddenly arched backward, as if forming a bridge.

Then, he snapped horizontally, dodging Margot's second bullet. Next, Lumian straightened like a coiled spring and hurled Fallen Mercury at Margot as if it were a flying dagger. Anticipating that his enemy had a Provocation-like ability and possibly poisoned the weapon, Margot dared not confront it head-on. He hastily twisted his body, allowing the pewter-black dirk to sail past him and embed into a crack in the barricade.

As he evaded the attack, Margot saw Lumian pounce on him like a tiger.

...

Only then did he notice that Lumian's ears were stuffed with thick wads of paper, rendering him almost immune to Margot's Provocation!

The best understanding of a Hunter always came from another Hunter!

This revelation infuriated Margot once more, as if he had been silently 'Provoked' by his opponent's prowess. Bam! Lumian clenched his right fist and struck Margot's temples with a sharp crack.

Margot blocked it with his left arm. Simultaneously, he raised his right hand and aimed the revolver at Lumian's head. Let's see how you dodge at this close range!

In an instant, Lumian leaned forward as if to headbutt Margot's chest and grabbed his right wrist with his left hand.

Meanwhile, his right leg swung up with incredible flexibility.

Not at the back of his head, but at Fallen lodged in a crack in the barricade Mercury, beside him!

The sinister, pewter-black dirk soared into the air, propelled by Lumian's kick, and flew straight toward Margot.

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Chapter 132 - 132 Black Scorpion

Chapter 132 Black Scorpion

Crash!

Margot barely managed to dodge the deadly dirk hurtling towards him, but in doing so, he failed to move his revolver in sync with Lumian's rapid motion. The bullet struck the opposite wall, sending stone fragments flying. With a metallic clink, Fallen Mercury zipped past Margot again and landed not far away on the ground.

Lumian straightened up and swiftly stomped his right foot onto the enemy's instep to stop him from raising his knee and slamming it into his abdomen.

In the blink of an eye, Lumian was nearly plastered to his opponent. He either slashed or slammed with both hands, or braced and blocked with his elbows. His feet delivered low kicks or stomps, and his knees jerked forward or bounced around. Margot was too preoccupied fending off these attacks to aim and fire.

The thug felt as if he were caught in a relentless storm of his opponent's blows. Moreover, Lumian stayed close, employing close-quarters combat techniques to prevent him from retreating and using his gun.

For Margot, such a fighting style was both foreign and dangerous.

Crash!

Margot's elbow smashed into the wall, causing the house to shudder.

Whack!

Margot's right wrist was twisted, and the black revolver slipped from his grasp, clattering to the ground.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Lumian unleashed a barrage of hands, elbows, knees, and feet, forcing the enemy to retreat repeatedly.

Towards the end, Margot could only block instinctively, his thoughts unable to keep pace with Lumian's swift movements.

However, he sensed that he had already deciphered the pattern of his opponent's attacks and anticipated the sequences that would follow. He could defend against all onslaughts with his muscle memory alone. In just a moment, he would launch a counterattack!

Instinctively, Margot raised his right foot to block the incoming low kick.

But he met nothing.

Lumian's left foot extended diagonally, defying the limits of human flexibility. He hooked the pewter-black dirk that lay silently beside him.

He had attacked Margot to force him to draw near to Fallen Mercury.

The pewter-black dirk dirk soared up and stabbed Margot's thigh.

Margot found himself pinned down by Lumian while balancing precariously on one foot. He had little recourse but to retract his right foot and twist his body slightly to evade.

Fallen Mercury grazed his thigh and tore through his milky-white pants, leaving a shallow trail of blood.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Lumian went on the offensive once more with the close-quarters combat techniques Aurore had taught him, overwhelming Margot until he had no time to tend to his leg injuries.

Luckily, the wound was superficial and bled only slightly.

Crash!

Margot's back collided with the wall.

Throughout the entire encounter, he hadn't even had a chance to speak. The other party still had his ears plugged, unafraid of any provocation.

Margot's blood boiled, but it only served to fuel his determination. He planned to trade his injuries for an advantage and escape his current predicament.

At that moment, his raised arms met nothing.

He watched in confusion and shock as the strange man with the white bandages on his face voluntarily retreated and created distance. Then, the mysterious man turned and sprinted away. As he ran, he flicked the pewter-black dirk up with his toes and snatched it in his left hand.

Momentarily stunned, Margot was about to give chase when footsteps echoed from the alley.

Hearing the gunshots, two patrolling police officers had rushed over with black semi-automatic revolvers, alerted by nearby residents who had "come downstairs" due to the fire.

"What happened? What's your Poison Spur Mob up to again?" one of the policemen demanded with a frown, recognizing Margot's face. Margot shot a

disdainful glance at the two officers in white shirts, black vests, and black uniform coats, and replied, “I was attacked. Officers, you’re too late!”

Although he said this, he was secretly relieved the police hadn’t arrived later and had scared the mysterious man away. Otherwise, he might have been hunted down.

After all, the strange man was likely a Sequence 8 Provoker. Moreover, his combat techniques were clearly superior to Margot’s, and his cunning allowed him to gain the upper hand.

The policeman’s face darkened.

“Then follow me back to give a statement. We’ll help you find the assailant. Also, is this your gun?”

He pointed at the revolver that had fallen to the ground.

Margot sneered. “Rely on you to find him? Haha, that’s the funniest joke I’ve heard this year! That gun belongs to the assailant. Take it away.”

With that, he briefly examined his wound to ensure he wasn’t poisoned.

Then, he sauntered out of the alley ahead of the two police officers.

The officer who had first spoken wore an ugly expression. He tried to draw his gun, but his partner held his hand down.

Returning to Rue du Rossignol, Margot’s face hardened.

His first instinct was to hurry home and rely on the traps he had set up to guard against a second wave of attacks.

But a few seconds later, Margot dismissed the idea, feeling it wasn’t sufficient.

He decided to go to the house of the Poison Spur Mob’s boss, ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger, and inform him of the attack. He would stay there for the night.

That was the safest place for Margot. Margot bandaged the wound on his right leg and sprinted from Rue du Rossignol to Avenue du Marché, making his way to the Suhit steam locomotive, and finally arriving at Unit 126, a three-story building with a small garden in the back.

Before long, he encountered Roger, the Black Scorpion, in the study.

A middle-aged man with firmly set black hair, Roger’s slightly plump face was framed by cold, deep blue eyes.

Dressed in aqua-blue silk pajamas, Roger regarded Margot with a blank expression. “You were attacked?”

“Yes.” Margot recounted the events that had transpired.

Roger’s blue eyes suddenly darkened, as if connected to a bottomless abyss or an eternally burning hell.

After a moment, he nodded.

“There are no signs of you being cursed. But you have to be careful. Your blood is on that knife.”

As Roger spoke, he approached Margot.

“I’ll help you eliminate any hidden dangers first.”

...

Margot breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Boss.”

He followed Roger out of the study and down the stairs into the basement.

Upon flipping the switch and illuminating the gas wall lamp, Roger pointed at the statue in the center and instructed, “Open it and crawl inside.”

The statue depicted a woman with gentle facial features, the folds of her long dress rendered vividly and lifelike.

Margot strode to the statue, pulled open the concealed door at its abdomen, and climbed in.

As the hidden door closed, an eerie silence filled the basement. ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger gazed at the statue and intoned a word in ancient Hermes.

“New life!”

Ghostly, indistinct black flames erupted from the statue’s surface, flowing like water and burning silently. After thirty seconds, Roger said to Margot, “You can come out now.”

This ritual was a method for eliminating the hidden dangers of a curse. By entering the female statue’s abdomen and reemerging, it symbolized a “rebirth.” Coupled with the corresponding Beyonder powers, it could sever any connection with the item that had fallen into the enemy’s hands.

“Wait for me in the study. I’ll search for clues about the assailant,” Roger instructed after ensuring Margot was unharmed.

Margot nodded and hastened out of the basement to the study. He pulled up a chair and settled into it.

...

As time ticked by, Margot suddenly felt his body becoming unbearably heavy, as if submerged in icy water.

His breathing grew labored.

Margot's pupils dilated, but he saw nothing.

He fought with all his strength, as if restrained by invisible ropes. He could barely move his arms, fingers, and feet.

Thud!

Margot finally collapsed to the floor, but the strange sensation persisted. His face turned an unnatural purple, and his mouth hung open. His thoughts grew increasingly murky. Why… With this question in mind, Margot succumbed to the encroaching darkness.

At the basement door, Roger emerged with a grave expression.

He has potent anti-divination abilities…

This matter isn't simple…

Roger the Black Scorpion contemplated as he returned to the study.

In the next second, his gaze froze. He discovered Margot sprawled on the ground, his face purple and his lower body soaked. He was no longer breathing.

After the Poison Spur Mob leader conducted a ritual to eliminate any lingering dangers of a curse, he mysteriously perished in the safest location of the Poison Spur Mob—right before Roger the Black Scorpion.

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207. Lumian, now in fresh attire, nodded with satisfaction.

Fallen Mercury informed him through its vibrations that the fate exchange had been completed.

This meant Margot would instantly be assaulted by the Montsouris ghost. Completing a fate exchange after stabbing someone took time-anywhere between five and thirty minutes, depending on the desired fate, the individual's strength, and their subconscious resistance. If Lumian was the target and he eagerly opened his mind and body, the fate exchange could be achieved swiftly—within seconds or even less than twenty. Gazing at the pewter-black dirk in his hand, Lumian smirked.

"When I have time, I'll teach you Morse code. Otherwise, every time we communicate, I have to constantly narrow down options based on your feedback. It's far too tedious."

Fallen Mercury's quivering blade stilled, as if stunned.

Lumian, triumphant after a successful hunt, was in high spirits. He teased with a smile, "Do you wonder why you should learn, even as a blade? Ambition is crucial. The same goes for being a blade. Do you want to remain like this forever?"

Then, he inquired, "What fate did you exchange this time?"

Lumian extended his spiritual sense to the pewter-black, patterned dirk.

With Fallen Mercury's assistance, he gradually deciphered the destiny droplets stored within the weapon.

It represented Margot's fate of receiving stacks of cash from his various underlings. "You have a knack for choosing fates." Lumian had been occupied with fighting and had delegated the fate exchange to Fallen Mercury.

He had merely informed it beforehand that he needed money.

After commending Fallen Mercury, Lumian grew pensive. How will this fate manifest after the exchange?

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Chapter 133 - 133 Suffering

Chapter 133 Suffering

Lumian couldn't make sense of it, but he didn't dwell on it either. He rolled up his sleeves, baring his right arm, and sliced it with the Fallen Mercury blade.

A brief moment of numbness was followed by a familiar pain, but he didn't flinch. He watched as blood oozed out and stained the silver-black blade crimson.

Almost instantaneously, a mercury illusory river, composed of intricate symbols, materialized before Lumian's eyes. The destiny droplets stored in the evil dirk seeped from its tip and flowed into the shallow wound.

Lumian concentrated, straining to discern the fate he sought to exchange.

He "saw" himself receiving treatment, "saw" himself falling asleep after releasing his emotions, and "saw" himself searching for Osta Trul…

Scenes flashed across Lumian's mind as if he had witnessed them firsthand.

Soon after, he located the fate of venturing outside the catacombs and encountering the Montsouris ghost from several days prior.

He swiftly raised the tip of Fallen Mercury and thrust it towards the complex symbols that appeared to be formed by the mercury river.

That fate proved heavy, and Lumian failed to stir it on his first attempt.

As the illusory river slowly faded, the scene in his mind became increasingly hazy. He hurriedly channeled most of his spirituality into the blade of Fallen Mercury.

At last, with a second stir, the fate of meeting the Montsouris ghost broke free from the illusory, mercury-hued river and shrank into a minuscule droplet, resembling a bead of mercury from a shattered thermometer.

The illusory droplet rapidly merged with the pewter-black dirk.

Only then did Lumian exhale a sigh of relief. He knew he had evaded the Montsouris ghost, and Fallen Mercury could now be deemed a Cursed Blade.

Once he treated the wound, an odd intuition suddenly struck him.

Guided by this intuition, Lumian exited Auberge du Coq Doré again, weaving between raucous drunks and a heated brawl. He returned to Rue du Rossignol and

halted outside the alley where he had assaulted Margot.

Furrowing his brow, he cautiously entered and flipped over the barricade.

In the next moment, Lumian's gaze instinctively fell upon the shadow in the corner.

Something lay quietly in the realm of darkness.

Sensing its significance, Lumian hurried over, crouched down, and picked up the object with his gloved left hand.

It was a bulging brown leather wallet.

Margot dropped it? The money his underlings plundered and handed over to him? Lumian roughly grasped how the fate exchange had transpired.

Although he couldn't recall whether Margot had dropped the wallet during their fierce battle or if it had 'fallen' afterwards, it didn't prevent Lumian from claiming the money.

He extracted the thick wad of cash and emptied the gold, silver, and copper coins from the change purse. Then, he tossed the wallet aside and left the alley.

Back in Auberge du Coq Doré Room 207, Lumian lit the carbide lamp and meticulously counted his newfound fortune.

In total, he had acquired 1,265 verl d'or and 15 coppet. Most were banknotes worth 10 verl d'or or less. There was only one 200 verl d'or note, one 100 verl d'or note, and two 50 verl d'or notes. A few Louis d'or were included as well.

Lumian stared at the money for a few seconds before sighing deeply.

Even ten donations from 'benevolent souls' can't compare to taking down a gang leader…

Naturally, not all of the money belonged to Margot. He was merely holding onto it for the Poison Spur Mob.

Lumian grabbed a stack of small bills amounting to 200 verl d'or and left Room 207, climbing the stairs.

In under a minute, he reached the fourth floor and came to a stop in front of Room 8.

He recalled that Margot had visited Auberge du Coq Doré in the evening to collect most of the money from an unlicensed prostitute named Ethans.

At the time, one of Margot's underlings must have been in charge, but the money eventually ended up in Margot's possession. Without knocking, Lumian crouched down and slid the stack of banknotes through the gap beneath the door.

He quickly straightened up, turned towards the stairs, and vanished into the shadowy corridor.

Lumian slept until six o'clock when the cathedral bell chimed.

He had slept soundly the night before, feeling as if the Provoker potion had been somewhat digested.

In the morning, I'll look for Osta Trul and see if Mr. K has replied. I'll also buy some better clothes and cosmetics from Quartier de l'Observatoire… In the afternoon, I'll visit the cheap clothing store at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman… Lumian wasn't eager to rise. He lay there, quietly contemplating the day's plans. Having escaped the threat of the Montsouris ghost, he placed disguising himself back on his to-do list.

After lingering in bed for a while, he ambled to the washroom to freshen up. Then, he went downstairs and purchased half a liter of apple cider and a loaf of bread with pork sausages from the vendors.

Having sated his hunger, he headed to the nearest cathedral square and found an empty corner to practice the combat techniques Aurore had taught him.

Lumian returned to Auberge du Coq Doré at 9:30 a.m., intending to rest for an hour before seeking out Osta Trul.

Upon entering the motel lobby, he spotted three maids cleaning various filthy areas under Madame Fels's supervision.

The motel owner hires cleaners every Monday… Lumian averted his gaze and walked towards the staircase.

At that moment, footsteps echoed from above.

Within ten seconds, Charlie appeared before Lumian, clad in a linen shirt, dark pants, and strapless leather shoes.

"You didn't go to the hotel?" Lumian asked, puzzled.

Charlie yawned and replied excitedly, "Don't you know? I'm off today. We can take one day off a week and choose whichever day we want."

Lumian chuckled. "Does this day off result in a reduction in your 'monthly salary' from Madame Alice?"

Charlie grinned sheepishly. "She has her own social engagements.

As they conversed, a foul odor drifted in from the door. The short, disheveled, gray-haired Ruhr and Michel entered the hotel.

"You didn't go to the steam locomotive station?" Charlie greeted them warmly.

Ruhr approached them first, then maintained a respectful distance.

“The market district is a bit chaotic today. We plan to rest for a day.”

“What happened?” Lumian inquired “curiously.”

Ruhr instinctively lowered his voice. “Margot of the Poison Spur Mob is dead. Many gangsters are searching for someone. Other gangs might clash with them at any moment. There are also many police officers present.

“Margot’s dead?” Charlie blurted out, astonished.

...

He had just thought the guy deserved to die yesterday, and now he was dead? Ruhr nodded gravely.

“I’ve heard several people mention it. Sigh, we can’t earn any money today.” His wife, Madame Michel, consoled him, “If we don’t go out, we don’t have to eat lunch. We can save some money.” Before Lumian could inquire about the situation outside, Charlie, snapping out of his daze, spun around and dashed upstairs.

Lumian’s eyes flickered as he trailed behind.

Thud, thud, thud. Charlie rapidly ascended to the fourth floor and sprinted to Room 8. Taking a deep breath, he slammed the wooden door.

“Who is it?” A slightly hoarse female voice emerged from within.

Charlie announced his name loudly.

“Didn’t I say I’m off the clock in the morning? back in the afternoon. Remember, 10 verl Co d’or. No discount this time!” the female voice responded impatiently, opening the door. This was Lumian’s first encounter with the woman named Ethans. Her flaxen hair tumbled to her shoulders, her similarly-colored eyes wary and her face etched with apprehension. She appeared to be twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with average looks that could only be described as delicate. Her face and clothes were clean, and her red dress exposed a generous expanse of fair skin on her chest. Charlie excitedly informed Ethans, “Did you know? Margot is dead! He’s really dead!”

“…” Ethans stared, dumbfounded. After several seconds, her slightly hoarse voice turned sharp. “Is that devil truly dead?”

“It’s true.” Charlie nodded without hesitation.

“You can finally escape that devil! You can finally live like a normal person!” Ethans glanced around, dazed, taking in Lumian’s expressionless eyes and Charlie’s animated countenance.

“He’s dead? He’s dead?” She murmured, thinking of the money that had mysteriously appeared in her room.

...

As she started to believe Margot was indeed dead, her vision blurred.

Tears poured down her cheeks. She couldn’t help but squat down and bury her face in her arms.

Her sobbing intensified, becoming more uncontrollable.

At that moment, footsteps echoed from the staircase.

Lumian turned his head and saw a young man in a white shirt, coat, and black jacket approaching.

Behind him were Margot’s three thugs. The lad’s brown hair was slightly curly, and his face bore prominent creases. He strode up to the weeping Ethans, crouched down, and grinned.

“I’m Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob. From today onwards, I’ll take care of you on Margot’s behalf.”

Charlie’s excited expression froze. Ethans’s cries halted abruptly. Slowly raising her tear-streaked face, she saw Wilson’s smile and the shadow his body cast.

The shadow was so dense that it couldn’t be dispelled. Lumian observed quietly, his head imperceptibly raised.

On the way to the first floor, Charlie, who had been silent for a long time, couldn’t help but ask, “Is there really no end to the suffering of the poor?”

“I like something Aurore Lee wrote,” Lumian replied, his face expressionless. “Sometimes, we’re not the ones at fault, but the world.”

As soon as he finished speaking, three people stomped up from the first floor. They were police officers in black uniforms, black vests, white shirts, and strapless leather boots.

The 1.85-meter-tall officer leading the group glanced at Charlie and Lumian and suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Pressing down on the gun at his waist, he asked in a deep voice, “Charlie Collent?” Charlie was stunned.

“It’s me, Officer. What’s the matter?”

The officer gestured at his colleagues and took out steel handcuffs.

As his two colleagues encircled Charlie, he said with a serious expression, “You’re suspected of murder. We’re arresting you.”

“Murder?” Charlie’s face displayed shock, fear, and confusion.

Lumian raised his eyebrows in surprise.

As the officer handcuffed Charlie with his colleague’s assistance, he informed him, “Madame Alice is dead!”

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Chapter 134 - 134 Courtesan

Chapter 134 Courtesan

“What?” Charlie’s disbelief was palpable.

Lumian shared his surprise, casting a sympathetic glance at Charlie.

He was convinced that Charlie had no reason to kill Madame Alice. After all, while she lived, Charlie stood to gain 500 verl d’or a month for the next six months. According to various publications, this sum was nearly equivalent to the monthly salary of a doctor, lawyer, mid-level civil servant, senior high school teacher, senior engineer, or deputy police lieutenant. For someone who had nearly starved to death and could only find work as an apprentice attendant, it was a small fortune.

As his two colleagues headed upstairs, the officer who had handcuffed Charlie tersely explained, “Madame Alice was discovered dead in her room at the H?tel du Cygne Blanc this morning. Multiple witnesses confirm you spent the night there and didn’t leave until close to midnight.”

Charlie’s fear and confusion mounted.

“How is this possible? How did she die…”

Muttering to himself, he suddenly turned to the officer, anxiety etched on his face, and insisted, “She was alive when I left! I swear by Saint Viève!”

The officer’s deep voice responded, “The preliminary autopsy report places Madame Alice’s time of death between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. last night. Besides you and her, no one else’s presence was detected.”

Could the other presence not be human? Lumian mused silently, considering the Montsouris ghost.

If it weren’t for his lack of an adequate disguise and his desire to avoid the detectives’ scrutiny, he would have voiced his thoughts.

“Impossible! This can’t be happening!” Charlie’s eyes widened, his voice raised in protest.

A police officer, who had slipped away earlier, descended from the fourth floor, a glittering diamond necklace held in his white-gloved left hand.

“Found this!” he informed the lead officer.

The officer nodded without further explanation to Charlie. He stared at him solemnly, declaring, “Charlie Collent, you’re under arrest for murder. You have the right to remain silent; anything you say can and will be used against you in court.”

“I didn’t do it! Do you hear me? I didn’t!” Charlie screamed, struggling futilely.

Despite his protestations, he was led out of Auberge du Coq Doré by the two police officers.

By then, several tenants had been drawn by the commotion to the staircase, where they watched the scene unfold.

Among them was Gabriel, who appeared to have just completed an all-night writing session on his manuscript.

“Do you think Charlie did it?” Lumian asked the playwright, deep in thought as he stared down the now-empty corridor.

Gabriel had emerged earlier and had a rough understanding of Charlie’s predicament.

He shook his head, replying, “I don’t think Charlie is guilty. He’s not a saint, but he’s not evil either.”

“Why do you say that?” Lumian inquired, turning to him.

Gabriel adjusted his black-framed glasses.

“Charlie was swindled out of his money and nearly starved, yet he never considered stealing from us.

“That means he either has principles and a moral compass, or he’s terrified of the law. In either case, it’s enough to prove he wouldn’t murder that lady.”

Lumian nodded, then chuckled.

“People can be impulsive and change.”

With that, he climbed the stairs to the fifth floor.

This was the top floor of Auberge du Coq Doré. Large sections of the ceiling overhead showed signs of water damage, as if heavy rain would cause it to leak.

Lumian approached Room 504, Charlie’s room, and extracted a small wire he carried with him to unlock the wooden door.

Inside, Charlie’s suitcase, bed, and wooden table had been rifled through by the two police officers earlier. Items were strewn about, but they were few and far between.

Lumian recalled that during a conversation with Charlie at the basement bar, he had mentioned pawning his only formal suit and many other belongings while unemployed. He still couldn't afford to retrieve them.

As he entered, his gaze shifted, and Lumian suddenly spotted a portrait.

Taped to the wall opposite the bed, it depicted a woman in a green dress.

The woman appeared to be in her late twenties, with auburn hair, jade-green eyes, and lustrous red lips. She possessed an exquisite beauty, radiating elegance.

Lumian was taken aback. The woman in the painting seemed eerily familiar.

He realized it must be Susanna Matisse, the infamous prostitute Charlie had confused for Saint Viève.

Yet he had never met this woman before, so there was no reason for him to find her familiar.

After some thought, Lumian suddenly remembered something.

During his Summoning Dance in Room 207, he had attracted a translucent figure that was clearly more powerful than the other entities.

The figure, too, was female and bore a striking resemblance to Susanna Matisse in the portrait. However, one had turquoise hair, the other auburn; one's hair was long enough to cover her naked body, while the other's was merely long enough to form a bun.

Moreover, the figure was even more alluring, seemingly capable of stirring hidden desires within anyone. Susanna Matisse's portrait didn't provoke such feelings in Lumian. A consequence of misguided prayers? Lumian silently nodded in agreement.

In the past, he wouldn't have questioned Charlie's actions. If it meant avoiding starvation, Lumian would have prayed sincerely to a prostitute, let alone Trier's guardian angel.

But now, through Aurore's grimoire, Lumian had gained a basic understanding of the entry-level Sequences of the twenty-two divine paths, sacrificial taboos, and associated mystical knowledge. He knew that careless praying could be perilous.

After searching for a while, he left Room 504, grabbed the carbide lamp, and hailed a public carriage on Avenue du Marché, heading toward Quartier de l'Observatoire.

As he ventured into the underground toward the area where Osta Trul typically lurked, Lumian periodically scrutinized the shadows behind the stone pillars.

He laughed at himself, thinking, I won't run into the Montsouris ghost again, will I? If that were the case, he would need to consider whether the Montsouris ghost had a particular connection to something he possessed, or if corruption had indirectly altered his "horoscope," resulting in exceptionally bad luck. Fortunately, Lumian's concerns proved unfounded. He found Osta Trul sitting beneath a stone pillar, a bonfire crackling nearby.

The hooded, black-robed figure glanced at Lumian and offered a genuine smile. "Mr. K has granted you permission to attend our biweekly mysticism gathering at nine o'clock on Wednesday night."

Osta's gaze bore a distinct sincerity, as if to say payment was due.

At 9 p.m. the day after tomorrow… Lumian nodded with a smile.

"Where's the gathering?"

"Meet me at my place an hour beforehand. I'll take you there," Osta replied without hesitation. Lumian tersely acknowledged.

"I'll pay you the rest then."

"Alright." Though Osta seemed slightly disappointed, he acquiesced.

...

Lumian inquired, "What should I be cautious of at the gathering?"

"Cover your face and hide your identity," Osta advised from experience. "You don't want other attendees exposing you if they're caught by the authorities, do you? Aside from Mr. K, no one should know everything." Lumian grinned, retorting, "You've already seen my face and know my identity. Should I consider burying you in some corner of Underground Trier after the first gathering?" Osta involuntarily shuddered and forced a smile.

"You're quite the joker. But I don't actually know who you are, where you live, or what you do. Besides, it's unlikely that you've shown me your true self."

Taking pleasure in unnerving the other party, Lumian found a rock and sat down. Basking in the warmth of the bonfire, he casually asked, "Have you ever heard of Suzanne Matisse?"

"I have," Osta replied, his excitement evident. "For a time, she was the woman of my dreams. I bought numerous posters and postcards featuring her image. A few years ago, she was Trier's most famous prostitute, the kind who attended high society banquets. She was linked to countless scandals involving members of parliament, high-ranking officials, and the wealthy. Rumor has it that she made hundreds of thousands of verl d'or annually, but she's been out of the limelight for the past two or three years. Nana has since taken her place as Trier's renowned courtesan. Sigh, she might have become someone's permanent mistress."

Hundreds of thousands of verl d'or? Lumian was taken aback.

"A high-level courtesan earns more than most best-selling authors?"

"Isn't that normal?" Osta wore a peculiar expression. "A high-level courtesan can sleep with members of parliament, bankers, and high-ranking officials, but a best-selling author can't[1]."

Amused and self-deprecating, Lumian remarked, "That's true. Poet Boller once said there is no difference between a poet and prostitute. The former sells the product of his imagination, the latter her body."

"I prefer bodies," Osta admitted candidly. Lumian inquired again, "Have you heard of the legend of a female ghost? She has turquoise hair, long enough to wrap around her body. Her features are exquisite, capable of enchanting most men and arousing their desires."

"No." Osta shook his head. With a wistful expression, he added, "If such a female ghost truly exists, I'd love to encounter her just once."

Lumian stood up and chuckled. "Then brace yourself for sudden death after doing it dozens of times a night."

...

"…" Osta's expression froze.

3 p.m., 27 Avenue du Marché, Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman Police Headquarters. Lumian, having spent nearly 300 verl d'or on three sets of differently graded clothes, affordable cosmetics, and other disguise props, entered the unusually noisy hall. Some people were being brought in, others were fortunate enough to leave, while still others argued loudly, caused a scene, and cursed-some slammed tables and kicked stools…

Lumian, his blond hair neatly combed back, black-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, and a mustache adorning his lips, appeared with overly fair cheeks. Dressed in a black formal suit and carrying a brown briefcase, he approached a male constable overseeing reception.

He stopped before the man, lifted his head slightly, and confidently announced, "I'm Charlie Collent's pro bono lawyer. I'd like to see my client."

[1] I remember Baudelaire mentioning it, but I couldn't find the source for the time being. It could be someone else.

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Chapter 135 - 135 Confirming the Situation

135 Confirming the Situation

The constable set down his newspaper and sized up Lumian, visibly unnerved by his unabashed confidence. He gestured to the notebook and fountain pen before him, saying, “Show me your lawyer’s license and register your name and purpose of visit.”

A license? Seriously? Lumian, the phony attorney, felt a surge of panic.

Hadn’t he read in countless novels and newspapers that simply identifying oneself as a lawyer was enough to gain access to a client?

As Lumian reached for the black fountain pen, his mind raced, formulating a plan.

He suddenly noticed that the constable across from him had shifted his attention to the recently discarded copy of Youth of Trier, fixated on the annual Trier cycling race.

He doesn’t seem to care about the lawyer’s license… An idea flashed through Lumian’s mind. Mimicking Aurore’s penmanship, he scrawled his ‘name’: “Guillaume Pierre, pro bono lawyer. Meeting client, Charlie Collent.”

After jotting it down, Lumian stood and nonchalantly glanced around.

Feigning delight, he raised his arm and exclaimed, “My little cabbage, long time no see!”

Confused faces turned in his direction. Lumian spun back to the registering constable and murmured, “I spotted a friend.”

The unspoken message: he’d present his lawyer’s license later.

Without waiting for a reply, Lumian strode to a corner of the hall.

The constable gave the register a cursory glance before returning his gaze to Youth of Trier.

Once in the corner, Lumian stole a peek at the preoccupied constable, then turned to the baffled onlookers with an apologetic grin.

“I’m sorry, I mistook you for someone else.”

Clutching his briefcase, he approached the police officer he had “chosen” earlier, who was now coming from the registration office.

Lumian lifted his chin and demanded haughtily, “I want to see my client, Charlie Collent.”

In the Intis Republic, attorneys held a far higher social status than ordinary constables.

The officer glanced back at the registration office, saw no cause for concern, and nodded.

“I’ll contact the person in charge of that case for you.”

Fifteen minutes later, Lumian found himself face-to-face with Charlie in a secured room, two officers standing guard at the door.

“Who are you?” Charlie asked, sinking into a chair across the table, his eyes filled with confusion.

His once-rosy cheeks were now pallid, fear etched into every line of his face.

He had heard of pro bono lawyers while chatting with other hotel staff and knew they were provided by government agencies or philanthropic organizations for destitute suspects. He never expected one to arrive just half a day after his arrest.

Lumian grinned, removed his black-framed glasses, winked with his right eye, and spoke in his natural voice, “Don’t you recognize me? I’m your pro bono lawyer.”

Charlie stared, dumbstruck. After a few seconds of careful scrutiny, a spark of recognition lit up his face.

But before he could speak, Lumian slipped his glasses back on and said, “Quiet. Listen to me.”

“Alright, alright.” Charlie snapped to attention.

Lumian’s smile vanished, replaced by a grave expression.

“I need to know the full details of what happened. That’s the only way I can clear your name.”

“Really?” Charlie asked, desperation in his voice, like a drowning man grasping at a lifeline.

Feigning his professionalism, Lumian questioned, “What time did you stay in the room with Mrs. Alice until?”

Charlie rubbed his face, struggling to recall through the haze of confusion and pain, “Madame Alice ordered room service. I entered her room before 8 p.m. and

stayed until she was tired. I only left at midnight. At that time, she had just laid down and was still awake. She was still alive!"

From 8 p.m. to midnight? Every day? That 500 verl d'or isn't easy to earn… Lumian mused, then adopted a lawyerly tone, "You have to be honest with me. Hiding anything will only hurt you in the end."

"I'm not lying. That's really the truth!" Lumian's words, actions, posture, and tone had convinced Charlie that he was truly his defense attorney.

After verifying a few more details, Lumian inquired, "After you gained Madame Alice's favor, did anyone express jealousy?"

"Many. Apprentices and official attendants alike, they were all jealous of me…" Charlie remembered.

They discussed the topic for a while before Lumian produced a photo, handing it to Charlie.

"See if you recognize this person."

Charlie gasped, "Isn't this Saint Viève?"

Why was she dressed so provocatively, her chest exposed?

"I've confirmed that the portrait in your room isn't Saint Viève. It belongs to the famous courtesan, Susanna Mattise." Lumian tactfully replaced 'prostitute' with 'courtesan' to prevent Charlie from becoming overly upset.

"Huh?" Charlie's face contorted with confusion.

I prayed to a courtesan, not an angel?

But why did my luck change for the better?

No, if it had truly improved, I wouldn't have been arrested…

Lumian produced another photo. It still depicted Susanna Mattise, but he had already altered the courtesan's hair color and made a few "edits."

"Take a look at this and tell me if you recognize this person."

Charlie scrutinized the image for a few seconds before his expression morphed into one of shock.

"Wh— She! How can this be?"

"So you do know her?" Lumian smirked.

Charlie looked up, his voice hollow, "S-she is… She's the woman from my beautiful dreams.

“Didn’t I tell you? I had these amazing dreams for a few days. I dreamed of making love to her. She was so passionate and gentle…

“H-how did you know I dreamed of her? I didn’t tell anyone! Why do you have a photo of her?”

Charlie’s gaze, now fixed on Lumian, had completely changed.

Is this really the southern kid I know?

Aside from his talent for pranks and good looks, there was nothing extraordinary about him!

Lumian’s lips curled into a smile as he gazed back at Charlie.

“Take a closer look at who’s in the photo.”

Charlie stared blankly at the image of the green-haired woman.

As he examined it, his expression morphed into sheer terror. He recoiled involuntarily, making the chair creak.

“No, that’s impossible! Susanna, Susanna, she’s that prostitute!” Charlie shouted, unable to suppress his emotions.

This revelation left him feeling as if he had encountered a malevolent spirit.

After praying to a portrait of a prostitute, he had not only escaped hunger and found a new job but had also dreamed of her and slept with her!

Wasn’t this akin to encountering a ghost?

Lumian nodded approvingly.

“Congratulations. At least you’re not blind.”

He had intended to help Charlie and divulge information as a prank to frighten him, but the two matters were unrelated.

The door to the interview room creaked open. A constable standing guard outside inquired warily, “What happened? Why are you shouting?”

“I helped him recall some key details,” Lumian explained calmly.

Charlie snapped out of his stupor.

“Yes, I remember something very important.”

And indeed, it was!

The policeman didn't press further and shut the door again.

Seeing this, Charlie leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table, and asked anxiously, "Did I encounter an evil female spirit?"

"It might not be a vengeful or evil spirit," Lumian said, watching Charlie's expression soften slightly before adding, "It might be even more troublesome than that."

At those words, Charlie's face turned ashen.

After a brief pause, he asked apprehensively, "You… you mean Madame Alice was killed by that evil spirit?"

"I'm not sure yet." Lumian stood up. "I need to examine Madame Alice's corpse."

"You even know how to investigate a corpse to determine the true cause of death?" Charlie found his neighbor increasingly enigmatic.

Lumian smiled but offered no answer.

As Charlie's defense attorney, Lumian had the right to inspect the corpse under police supervision, and he could even enlist the assistance of an independent pathologist. So, after signing two documents under the name Guillaume Pierre, Lumian was escorted to the basement of the market district's police headquarters and into the morgue where the body was kept.

The officer leading him slid open the cabinet, unzipped the body bag, and pointed to the female corpse.

"This is Madame Alice."

In life, Alice had preserved her appearance quite well, with only faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Her thick brown eyebrows framed her face, her cheeks sagged slightly, and her skin had taken on a deathly pallor.

Lumian glanced casually at the body and said to the officer, "I'm good."

He wasn't a pathologist who had come to conduct a genuine examination; his objective was merely to pinpoint the approximate location of Madame Alice's remains.

After exiting the morgue, Lumian turned to the accompanying officer and asked, "Where's the nearest restroom?"

"Take a right at the end of the corridor," replied the officer, despite his growing impatience.

Lumian hastened his steps and entered the basement restroom.

Once inside, he locked the wooden door and performed the Summoning Dance in the cramped space.

Amidst the frenzied, contorted dance, a chilling wind swept through the restroom. Vague figures materialized one by one, their pale or bluish-white faces staring at Lumian with empty eyes.

These were the lingering obsessions of the departed.

Lumian had never witnessed such a spectacular sight before. For a moment, he felt as if he were surrounded by ghostly specters.

He steadied himself and continued the second half of the dance while searching for Madame Alice.

Soon, he spotted the fierce-looking lady with the thick brown eyebrows.

Lumian unsheathed the ritual silver dagger and inflicted a wound, commanding Madame Alice to attach herself to him.

Madame Alice consumed the drop of blood and entered Lumian's body.

Immediately, Lumian felt a shiver race down his spine, and his chest grew heavy.

His breath came in labored gasps.

Without hesitation, Lumian amplified Madame Alice's obsession, foregoing any selection of her characteristics or abilities.

Almost instantaneously, Lumian's vision dimmed, and he saw Madame Alice lying on the bed, her mouth and nose smothered by a down pillow. However, there was no one pressing down on the pillow in her line of sight!

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Chapter 136 - 136 Initial Summoning Attempt

136 Initial Summoning Attempt

Lumian, consumed by Madame Alice's fixation, found breathing increasingly difficult. His body ached more intensely, as if he had once again encountered the Montsouris ghost and teetered on the brink of death.

This was a true death experience.

Concerned he might lose control, Lumian chose not to push further. He ordered Madame Alice's lingering spirit to vacate his body.

Gasping for air, he wiped the cold sweat from his brow before reverting to his slightly arrogant novice lawyer persona.

Accompanied by the police officer, he headed back to the interview room.

Charlie sprang to his feet, leaning forward with his hand braced against the table. His face was a mix of anxiety and anticipation.

Without waiting for a question, Lumian seemed to hear Charlie ask, "What's the result?"

Lumian nodded and made a calming motion.

His gesture implied that the autopsy findings aligned with his expectations.

Relief washed over Charlie's face instantly. It was as though he'd expended all his energy in that moment. He slumped back into his chair, physically drained.

In front of the two constables at the door, Lumian declared firmly, "Don't worry about anything else. I've got it covered.

"You only need to do one thing. During the next questioning, recount the entire story to these gentlemen without omitting a single detail, no matter how absurd or implausible it may seem.

"Of course, stick to what happened up until your arrest. There's no need to delve into our conversation."

Since a lawyer-client dialogue might involve courtroom tactics others had no right to know, the two officers at the door didn't find Lumian's last statement odd. After

all, Charlie Collent was an unfortunate kid facing a serious criminal case for the first time and requiring a lawyer. He likely didn't know the rules and needed explicit guidance.

Charlie grasped Lumian's message: Don't reveal to the police that I discovered the issue with the portrait!

"Alright." Charlie wasn't as angry, terrified, or flustered as when he was first arrested and brought to the station, but he wasn't as chatty as usual either.

After departing the market district's police headquarters, Lumian circled twice before finding an alley blocked by a barricade. He changed his clothes, removed his glasses, and altered his makeup style.

Now that I have enough money, I can set up a safe house and a place to switch disguises based on Aurore's novels. Lumian recalled his sister's writing, piecing together the method for handling such matters.

He also fully intended to purchase a copy of Men's Aesthetics.

Mastering makeup without guidance was impossible. He'd mainly relied on his hairstyle, glasses, and attire to conceal his identity.

En route to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian contemplated how to extricate Charlie from his dire situation.

Who exactly is Susanna Matisse, or rather, the bizarre creature she morphed into? Why did she murder Madame Alice?

Why did she help Charlie in the past and engage in the act with him in the dream?

The prospect of writing to Madam Magician unsettled Lumian.

Judging by the speed of her previous response and its content, he sensed her indirectness: "Don't bother me unless it's important!"

If Lumian faced an issue involving Susanna Matisse, writing to inquire would be acceptable. However, this predicament only concerned his neighbor.

It was highly likely that the enigmatic, potent woman who detested complications wouldn't respond.

And this could impact her attitude towards Lumian.

If I'm not asking Madam Magician, why not inquire at Mr. K's mysticism gathering? If the attendees are Beyonders at Osta Trul's level, they might not have the answer… As Lumian mulled it over, he ascended the stairs and entered his room.

His gaze fell on the suitcase containing Aurore's grimoires, and he experienced a sudden revelation.

Why should I investigate Susanna Matisse and deal with her personally?

My sole objective is to rescue Charlie!

Even if I can uncover Susanna Matisse's vulnerability and vanquish her, can I coerce a peculiar creature like her to turn herself in at the police station?

If she dares to go, the police won't dare to entertain her. Given her displayed characteristics, wouldn't she indulge in an orgy on the spot?

Lumian rapidly discerned the distinction between goals and means.

There was no need for such effort to exonerate Charlie and secure his release from police headquarters!

He simply had to inform Bureau 8, the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery that Charlie's case involved Beyonder elements and prompt them to intervene in the investigation!

Even a low-level Beyonder with no intelligence network or mystical powers could detect something amiss with Susanna Matisse. There's no reason why official investigators couldn't uncover the invisible force behind Madame Alice's demise. Eventually, they would not only verify Charlie's innocence but also help him escape Susanna Matisse's grasp and resolve the issue with the strange creature entirely. Lumian had a clear conjecture about the subsequent events after the lunatic upstairs had sought refuge in the cathedral upon encountering the Montsouris ghost.

He had urged Charlie to divulge everything at the market district's police headquarters to attract the attention of official Beyonders.

Nevertheless, he felt compelled to act. He couldn't rely solely on ordinary police officers.

What if they deemed Charlie's story a fabrication intended to mock their intelligence and resorted to violence to coerce a confession on the spot?

Lumian's gaze swept over the crumpled newspaper on the wooden table, recalling how he or his sister had snipped out the livre bleu's words and pieced them together to compose a letter seeking assistance from the authorities.

Transform Charlie's experience into a letter and 'deliver' it to a nearby cathedral? Lumian nodded, deciding to execute the plan.

Armed with the plea for help and Charlie's confession, it should pique the interest of official Beyonders.

As he was about to search for appropriate phrases in Novel Weekly, Lumian suddenly frowned.

Could the officials link a similar request for help to Cordu? Would they associate me, a wanted criminal, with Charlie?

Lumian didn't know if Ryan and his associates had fully reported their findings to official Beyonders nationwide, but he was unwilling to take that risk.

Imitate Aurore's handwriting?

Unlike a lawyer's signature that doesn't raise suspicion, Ryan and his team suggested that the letter would likely undergo various checks, including divination…

Disguise myself and have someone else write it for me? As his thoughts raced, Lumian suddenly had an idea. I can summon a spirit world creature to write it for me!

If the officials detect any issues, they won't be able to make the spirit world creature identify me since they don't know the summoning incantation!

The more Lumian considered it, the more he believed it was a solid plan. He pulled out a chair, sat down, and began devising the summoning incantation.

The first sentence was undoubtedly, "Spirit wandering in the void."

After some thought, Lumian penned the second sentence.

"The friendly creature that can be subordinated."

Summoned spirit world creatures had to be under Lumian's command to assist him in writing letters. Friendliness provided essential protection for the summoner.

As for the third sentence, Lumian didn't have lofty expectations. He merely needed to incorporate the two aspects of being weak and proficient in Intisian.

After several moments of mental permutation, the third sentence materialized on paper:

"Weakling proficient in Intisian."

Phew… After writing, Lumian exhaled.

He then leafed through Aurore's grimoire and translated the few unmastered words into Hermes.

Immediately after, he set up the altar and commenced the summoning.

Soon, he completed the ritual and observed the candle flame turning a dark green hue and expanding to the size of a human head.

A hazy, translucent figure materialized, its head resembling an ox's and the rest, a dog's.

"Help me write a letter," Lumian said in Hermes as he gazed at the spirit world creature.

The bewildered ox-headed dog didn't respond.

"I order you to help me write a letter," Lumian emphasized in Hermes.

The ox-headed dog appeared dumbstruck, as though it didn't comprehend.

Lumian made several more attempts, but the ox-headed dog remained unresponsive.

Having no other choice, he terminated the summoning early to preserve his spirituality.

He started pondering the issue.

I can't communicate with that guy…

Amenable to subordination doesn't mean it can be communicated with…

With this realization, Lumian modified the second summoning incantation to "A friendly creature that can be communicated with."

Being able to communicate meant being able to make requests!

This time, a colossal "snail" emerged from the dark green flames.

"Hello." Lumian attempted to greet it in Intisian.

The snail emitted an ethereal voice.

"Hello, what's the matter?"

It also spoke Intisian.

"Can you help me write a letter?" Lumian was overjoyed.

The "snail" replied in a troubled tone, "But I don't have any hands."

"…" Lumian had no choice but to end the summoning.

After some consideration, he changed the phrase "weakling proficient in Intisian" to "weakling who can write Intisian."

"Can write" covered both the knowledge and necessary physical requirements.

Before long, Lumian completed his third summoning.

He saw a transparent creature resembling a rabbit.

“Can you help me write a letter?” Lumian asked with intense anticipation.

The “rabbit” nodded, picked up the pen on the table, and wrote an Intisian word on the paper.

“A letter.”

“…” Lumian’s lips twitched.

This creature didn’t seem too bright.

With resolve, Lumian grabbed a pen and paper and scribbled a plea for help, including Susanna Mattise’s portrait, details about the wet dream, Madame Alice’s death, and Charlie’s arrest.

Then, he said to the “rabbit,” “Copy it!”

The “rabbit” took the fountain pen and diligently transcribed it.

Soon, it finished its task.

Lumian examined it and nodded in satisfaction.

In the next second, his smile froze.

Not only had the dimwit copied the entire contents of the letter, but it had also replicated his handwriting.

In other words, it was in Lumian’s script!

Lumian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He pointed at Novel Weekly and said, “Copy in that font.”

The “rabbit” nodded slowly and rewrote without complaint.

A few minutes later, Lumian received a seemingly printed plea for help.

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Chapter 137 - 137 Hooha

137 Hooha

Lumian examined the letter with gloved hands and breathed a sigh of relief.

No issues this time!

Completing three consecutive spirit world creature summoning rituals had left him feeling drained.

After a moment's consideration, Lumian asked the rabbit-like spirit world creature, "Can you do me another favor?"

The "rabbit" thought seriously for a few seconds before giving a slow nod.

Lumian unzipped his grayish-blue work uniform.

"Then follow me first."

The ethereal and transparent "rabbit" leaped from midair to Lumian's side, assuming the role of a loyal companion.

Lumian sighed quietly and said, "What I mean is, you can hide inside my clothes to avoid detection by any Beyonder with heightened spiritual perception."

The "rabbit" wore a blank expression as it hopped into Lumian's clothes and curled up.

Since it had no true mass or weight, his clothes could be zipped up quickly without leaving a trace.

After stowing the letter in the same pocket, Lumian dissolved the spiritual barrier, removed his gloves, and exited Room 207.

He meandered toward Avenue du Marché, nearing the Suhit steam locomotive station.

It was just past five o'clock, and many people were still at work. The street was neither crowded nor deserted. Groups of passersby headed for the public carriage station sign or searched for the subway entrance. They carried their luggage and walked on foot to nearby streets in search of temporary accommodations for the night.

Lumian patted his right pocket and pointed at the postbox several dozen meters away. Lowering his voice, he said, “See that green metal cylinder?”

He felt a vibration in his pocket. The “rabbit” had responded in kind.

Lumian exhaled in relief and instructed, “Place the letter beside you in that metal cylinder.”

Having said that, Lumian massaged his temples and activated his Spirit Vision.

He watched the “rabbit” emerge, enveloping the plea for help. It maneuvered through the crowd and reached the green metal cylinder.

Just as Lumian thought the “rabbit” would deposit the letter in the postbox and successfully complete the mission, the creature entered the postbox with the letter.

Moments later, it exited the postbox and flew back to Lumian, leaving the letter inside.

Lumian closed his eyes and consoled himself, I suppose it’s considered tossed in…

He then left Avenue du Marché with the “rabbit” and located a vacant alley. In Hermes language, he informed the “rabbit” that the summoning was over.

After the “rabbit” returned to the spirit world, Lumian finally felt at ease.

He resolved to stop aiding Charlie. The rest would hinge on how the official Beyonders handled the situation.

If it weren’t for the fact that this matter is intriguing enough, I wouldn’t have bothered to help him. Do I have to battle that enigmatic creature, Susanna Mattise, who’s clearly formidable, on his behalf? Lumian mused silently.

He chuckled.

In Cordu, if those crude fellows understood the traits Susanna Mattise exhibited, they would undoubtedly ask slyly whether he wanted to fight her in bed or in the hayloft.

Of course, Lumian could be just as coarse when dealing with them.

On his way back to Rue Anarchie, he discovered a meat patty shop and purchased Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf for dinner.

Paired with the soda sold by street vendors, Lumian navigated the crowd as he ate, occasionally evading hands that covertly reached for his wallet.

Compared to Rouen Meatloaf, Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf was less greasy. The fish was refreshing and delicate, the beef savory and crispy, the dough’s subtle

sweetness had a bite, and the aroma of spices and fat ignited Lumian's taste buds one by one with a rich texture.

After eating and drinking his fill, he clutched the glass bottle that still contained a third of the pale-red liquid and sighed appreciatively.

No wonder the Trieriens love meatloaves…

When I get the chance, I'll visit Rue Richelieu in the library district and try the first restaurant that created Red Snapper Hot Beef Meatloaf…

Based on the newspapers and magazines he had perused before, he could recite several famous meatloaves off the top of his head.

Degan Meatloaf, Périgueux Meatloaf, Tudenan Cashew Pie, Minced Meat Pie…

Sipping the pomegranate-flavored soda, Lumian turned onto Rue Anarchie.

What met his gaze was a chaotic tableau. The suspected gangsters brandished either axes or clubs, squaring off in the street.

Pedestrians steered clear, and the vendors retreated from Rue Anarchie one by one. The residents of the houses on both sides slammed their windows shut.

Lumian didn't venture further. He backtracked a few steps and found a wall pillar to conceal himself behind as he observed the unfolding scene with interest.

He suspected that his assassination of the Poison Spur Mob's Margot had aroused the suspicions of several gangs in the market district, ultimately escalating into a standoff.

After waiting nearly 15 minutes, Lumian still didn't witness the mobsters erupt into full-scale combat.

His anticipation for the confrontation left him disappointed. He cursed under his breath, "Are you guys going to do this or not? You're blocking the street without fighting. Do you think you have too much time on your hands?"

With that in mind, Lumian glanced at the five-story grayish-white building beside him.

He seriously contemplated finding a room and hurling the empty soda bottle between the two factions, tricking them into believing the opposing mob leader had signaled the start of the battle.

That way, Lumian would have a spectacle to enjoy.

Just as he was about to put his plan into action, a large contingent of police officers in black uniforms appeared at both ends of Rue Anarchie.

Leading them were officers on tall brown or black horses, brandishing shields and clubs. They advanced towards the mobsters, step by step,

exuding an immense pressure that caused many of the gangsters to waver.

When the mounted police charged, the mobsters gathered on Rue Anarchie dispersed. Some fled, while others were beaten to the ground.

Lumian couldn't help but want to applaud. His thirst for excitement was thoroughly quenched.

He had only read about such scenes in novels and news articles, the latter of which often glossed over the gritty details!

In no time, Rue Anarchie returned to its usual cacophony.

Lumian finished his last sip of pomegranate soda and sauntered back to Auberge du Coq Doré, entering Room 207.

Sitting by the bed, he replayed the entire process of writing and posting the letter in his mind to ensure he hadn't overlooked any details that could expose him to the official Beyonders.

After a while, Lumian sighed softly.

"If only I had a messenger. It wouldn't have been so troublesome."

Unfortunately, obtaining a messenger wasn't easy. Even his sister Aurore didn't have one.

To date, Lumian knew of only two people who possessed a messenger.

One was Madam Magician, and the other was the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president, Hela, whom Aurore had mentioned.

Hela… Lumian's expression gradually darkened.

If the Aurore in his dream indeed bore some influence from her soul fragment, it was apparent that Aurore trusted the vice president a great deal. Her first move upon encountering a problem was to summon the other party's messenger for assistance.

I wonder if Hela knows Aurore's true identity, or if she discovered through that… that obituary that Aurore has… has already passed on… Lumian muttered to himself.

As he pondered, an idea struck him.

It was actually possible for him to summon Hela's messenger!

The summoning incantation comprised only three sentences. Lumian was certain the last phrase was “a messenger that belongs to Hela.” The first two sentences followed a fixed format and requirements. As long as he attempted a few more combinations, he’d find the correct sequence!

Moreover, under such circumstances, Lumian wouldn’t face any danger even if the initial combinations were incorrect. This was because the description of a messenger belonging to Hela eliminated other possibilities.

In other words, he’d either fail to summon it or successfully summon Hela’s messenger.

Should I write a letter to Hela and inform her of what happened to Aurore? Lumian found himself momentarily stumped.

Considering that his sister had mentioned “my notebook” when she pushed him away, and that much of the mystical knowledge in her notebook originated from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian quickly made up his mind. If he could establish a connection with this organization, it would aid him in uncovering the crucial information hidden within the Warlock notebook.

He resolved to summon Hela’s messenger right away!

Although he still harbored doubts about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society’s vice president, he didn’t believe he possessed any value she coveted. Besides, Aurore had trusted Hela while she was alive.

Lumian walked to the wooden table, sat down, and began writing.

“Honorable Madam Hela,

“I apologize for writing you this letter. I am Muggle’s younger brother. I regret to inform you that she encountered misfortune and has passed away.

“This involves a catastrophe brought about by worshiping an evil god. Only a few people and I escaped.

“I’m not sure if this matter interests you, so I won’t elaborate. I don’t wish to waste your time.

“What I want to know is, did Muggle mention anything suspicious to you in the past year?

“…”

After staring at the letter for a few seconds, Lumian slowly exhaled and folded the paper.

He then cleaned the room, set up the altar again, and attempted the first combination.

“The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, a friendly creature that can be subordinated, a messenger that belongs solely to Hela.”

After reciting the incantation, Lumian gazed at the dark-green candle flame and patiently awaited the messenger’s arrival.

Time ticked by, but nothing happened on the altar.

Undeterred, Lumian spoke again, “I! I summon in my name:

“The spirit wandering above the world;

“The friendly creature that can be subordinated;

“A messenger that belongs solely to Hela…”

The dark green candle flame suddenly flickered and grew larger.

At that moment, not only did the area above remain unlit, but it also grew darker.

In the darkness, a shape quickly materialized.

It was a human-like skull, seemingly forged from pure silver. It emitted a gentle light that dispelled the encroaching darkness.

Pale-white flames burned in the skull’s eye sockets, instilling a sense of danger in Lumian.

After staring at Lumian for a few seconds, the pure silver skull opened its mouth and bit down on the airborne letter.

Then, it retreated back into the reassembled darkness.

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Chapter 138 - 138 Letter

138 Letter

Lumian completed the ritual on his second attempt. He cleared the wooden table and opened Aurore's grimoire. Under the glow of the carbide lamp, he thumbed through the relevant sections.

In under fifteen minutes, he sensed something. He looked up and fixed his gaze on a spot near the window.

A folded letter lay there, undisturbed.

That fast? Lumian, surprised, reached out and took the letter.

Hela's response, vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, had arrived sooner than expected.

!!

Lumian unfolded the letter and skimmed the elegantly written words.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Ever since Muggle missed last month's gathering, I've had a bad feeling.

"There are too many dangers in this world. Sometimes, we can't avoid them just because we want to unless we can control everyone around us.

"If you wish, you can tell me about Muggle's misfortune. You don't have to go into great detail. Just tell me the general situation…

"From the fact that you can summon my messenger, you should have stepped onto the Beyonder path. I'm not sure if your sister told you that this means you'll always be accompanied by danger and madness, but I have to remind you that restraint and caution are our best friends.

"In the future, if you have any questions about mysticism, you can ask me by writing to me. Although I'm not one of those with vast knowledge, I can answer many questions.

"I've only met Muggle twice in the past year, mainly discussing various matters in the Beyonder domain. What left a deep impression on me was that she mentioned that a friend of hers was affected by a strange dream, hoping to find a solution. If necessary, she wanted to hire a real psychiatrist to treat him…"

Lumian silently read Hela's reply, his face twisting with emotion.

Aurore had been searching for a solution to his bizarre dream!

Lumian composed himself and contemplated his response.

Suddenly, he froze.

His brows furrowed as he muttered, "Aurore told Hela about hiring a real psychiatrist…

"Considering Madame Susie's description, a true psychiatrist must refer to a specific Sequence of the Spectator pathway…

"Only Beyonders skilled in this domain can prevent me from dreaming of the world shrouded in gray fog…"

The issue wasn't with the situation. The problem was:

Aurore's grimoire only had Sequence 9 Spectator recorded for the pathway!

Yet, she clearly knew about Psychiatrist!

Lumian quickly recalled the two conversations in his dream.

First, Aurore had said she wanted to find a genuine Hypnotist for him.

Second, Aurore had mentioned that she knew Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 of all pathways and had a certain understanding of them.

Psychiatrist is often associated with hypnosis. Hypnotist is most likely a Sequence of the Spectator pathway as well, perhaps even superior to Psychiatrist…

Aurore's grimoire doesn't have records of the corresponding Sequence 8 or Sequence 7 of the Spectator pathway… Lumian's expression became grave, intermingled with a twisted thrill.

After so many days, he had finally discovered a discrepancy in Aurore's grimoire!

Previously, he had his suspicions but wasn't certain if there was any hidden anomaly. After all, Aurore in his dream was a figure formed from his memories and impressions under the influence of the soul fragment. Everything she said might not be accurate or complete. It was normal for her not to mention any exceptions explicitly.

Now, Hela's response indirectly confirmed that Aurore truly knew about one or more Sequences within the Spectator pathway and possessed a certain grasp of their related abilities.

Why hadn't Aurore recorded this knowledge in her grimoire? What was the secret behind this inconsistency? Lumian pulled out a blank sheet of paper, his emotions a blend of grief and anticipation.

In under a minute, he wrote, "Honorable Madam Hela,

"The truth is…

"My memory of the actual events is fragmented due to the calamity.

"If you could assist me in locating Guillaume Bénet, Pualis de Roquefort, and others, I would be deeply grateful. Their appearances and attributes can be found on the authorities' wanted posters.

"Lastly, I'm curious about the real psychiatrist Muggle intended to hire."

In his letter, Lumian briefly touched upon Cordu. He made no mention of the dream, the loop, or his rescue. He only speculated that Padre Guillaume Bénet, under someone's guidance, had worshipped an evil god and banished Madame Pualis, who followed another sinister deity. Bénet then attempted a ritual with the entire village as a sacrifice. At the crucial moment, Muggle, selected as a vessel, pushed Lumian away, an essential sacrifice, causing the ritual's failure and Cordu's destruction. Finally, the official Beyonders, who had been called for aid, cleaned up the mess.

Lumian reassembled the altar, summoned the silver skull, and handed it the letter.

In less than fifteen minutes, he received a second reply from Hela.

Rather than comparing response speeds between Madam Magician and Madame Hela, Lumian eagerly read the letter's contents.

"I can sense your sorrow and understand your desire to uncover the truth and exact vengeance upon the perpetrator.

"As Muggle's friend, I'll aid you to the best of my ability, including but not limited to locating those individuals.

"I can also offer you a fresh lead on this matter. To my knowledge, Muggle's parents and other family members may still be alive in this world. She had distanced herself from them for some reason and didn't dare return to Trier. I'm unsure if they're in any danger or if they've come into contact with the evil god's followers.

"I don't know which Psychiatrist Muggle sought. Our organization has numerous genuine Psychiatrists, and many gatherings Muggle and I attended don't overlap. I'll assist you by inquiring with members who have interacted with her to see if you can obtain the answer you seek…

“Until this investigation is complete, I’ll help conceal the fact that Muggle is deceased…

“If you relocate in the future, remember to summon my messenger again to prevent me from losing contact with you after obtaining pertinent information…”

After reading, Lumian fell silent for a long while before exhaling slowly.

Initially, he’d imagined Madame Hela would invite him to join the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, taking Aurore’s place. In doing so, he could more effectively investigate the Psychiatrist Aurore sought to hire. However, it seemed the organization was highly cautious about recruiting new members. They might even need to meet specific criteria to be considered candidates. For instance, Aurore had mentioned that none of them could return to their hometowns.

Maybe Madame Hela is observing and testing me… Lumian reassured himself and resumed studying Aurore’s grimoire.

As for Aurore’s original family, he was at a loss for where to begin.

…

Wednesday, 7:50 p.m., 20 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Lumian rapped on Osta Trul’s door, dressed in a grayish-blue worker’s uniform and a dark-blue, almost black cap.

Osta, clad in black robes and a hood, opened the wooden door and glanced around. He grinned and remarked, “You’re more punctual than I anticipated.”

“I honor my promises better than you might think.” Lumian strode into the room and handed Osta banknotes and coins worth 80 verl d’or.

Osta accepted it, counting twice with an even broader smile.

As he guided Lumian downstairs, he rambled, “The market district’s been somewhat chaotic lately. Baron Brignais didn’t even come to me for money.”

“A gang leader died,” Lumian commented nonchalantly.

Realizing the connection, Osta said regretfully, “Why couldn’t Baron Brignais have died?”

“Even if Baron Brignais were dead, there’d still be Baron Guillaume and Baron Pierre. As long as the Savoie Mob exists, you’d have to repay the loan you owe,” Lumian taunted.

Osta’s expression soured.

Before long, he and Lumian boarded a public carriage. They each paid 30 coppet and found seats.

In about an hour, the carriage arrived at Avenue du Boulevard on the Srenzo River's north bank, Quartier 8, from the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman on the river's south bank.

This was the heart of the entire Intis Republic. The presidential Pavilion of Pleasure, the Grand Palace where Emperor Roselle once resided, and various newspaper headquarters were all here, encircled by upscale residences.

Lumian had previously read in newspapers that the average rent in this district was 4,000 verl d'or annually, roughly 74 verl d'or weekly. The priciest ones could even reach tens of thousands.

Noticing the empty carriage, Lumian lowered his voice and inquired of Osta, "Is Mr. K hosting a gathering on Avenue du Boulevard?"

Osta smirked and replied, "Always. Psychic and Arcane have their headquarters on Avenue du Boulevard as well."

You guys sure know how to hide… Lumian gazed at the broad, flat avenue outside the window, the orderly Intis parasol trees lining the street, and the elegant, light-colored buildings behind them.

Just before 8:50 p.m., Osta led Lumian into the six-story beige luxury house at 19 Rue Scheer.

"This is Psychic magazine's headquarters, but they only occupy the top three floors." Osta didn't ascend the stairs but turned right into a corridor on the ground floor.

Only then did he inform Lumian, "Mr. K wants to see you beforehand."

"Alright." Lumian dipped his head and adjusted his hat, seemingly preoccupied with something.

Osta produced an iron-colored mask and grinned.

"It's time to disguise yourself. You can't let everyone see your true appearance."

In the next instant, Lumian looked up.

His face was shrouded in layers of white bandages, leaving only his eyes, nostrils, and ears exposed.

Upon seeing this, Osta's heart nearly skipped a beat.

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Chapter 139 - 139 Mr. K

139 Mr. K

Within moments, Osta, who had been on the verge of a complaint, managed to force a smile and said, “You’re quite the menacing sight like this.”

“It’s a classic look in literature,” Lumian replied with a deliberately smug tone.

Osta said nothing, opting instead to don his iron mask, concealing his expression.

Taking a few steps forward, he halted and rapped on the door to the right.

Two long pauses, one short pause, and one long pause… Lumian watched Osta Trul’s actions with the keen eye of a Hunter.

!!

Within seconds, the dark-red wooden door creaked open.

The first thing Lumian saw was a plush, pale-yellow carpet, followed by classical-styled tables, chairs, sofas, and display shelves.

A figure stood in the shadows cast by gas wall lamps near the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Like Osta Trul, he wore the black robe of an ancient warlock, complete with a large hood. Lumian couldn’t help but think, Can you even see the person standing in front of you clearly when you’re dressed like this?

“Mr. K, Ciel has arrived,” Osta announced respectfully to the nearly six-foot-tall figure as he stepped inside.

Lumian followed closely.

With a clang, the door shut behind him.

Mr. K turned to face Lumian. “Why do you want to attend our gathering?”

His voice was low and gravelly.

“For potion formulas, Beyonder characteristics, mystical items, and mysticism knowledge. It’s not like it’s for love or faith, right?” Lumian replied with intentional cynicism.

He then chuckled.

“I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t mind telling you about me.”

Lumian’s voice deepened.

“In a catastrophe brought on by Beyonder powers, I lost my entire family.

“Not only did it cause me immense pain, but it made me realize that those so-called orthodox gods can’t save us!

“From that day on, I sought Beyonder power and a way to forget all pain. I wanted to become powerful enough. I wanted those who brought me misfortune to experience the same torture.”

The hooded Mr. K seemed to stare at Lumian without interruption. As for Osta Trul, he was visibly shocked. Ciel’s words revealed raw, unmasked pain. His desire for the Samaritan Women’s Spring was genuine!

Once Lumian finished speaking, Mr. K nodded and said, “There are two rules for participating in our gathering:

“Second, don’t attempt to follow other participants.”

Only these two? Lumian hadn’t expected so few constraints.

He didn’t need to think hard to spot several loopholes immediately.

Not attacking directly? Does that mean I can use Provoke to incite the other party to death?

Just because I don’t attempt to follow doesn’t mean I can’t do anything else to the target…

Is selling fake ingredients, fake formulas, fake Beyonder characteristics, and fake mystical items also allowed?

Lumian suppressed his urge to retort and nodded.

“No problem.”

As he responded, he felt Mr. K’s gaze on him, scrutinizing every inch of his flesh and skin.

It made him feel like he was in the sights of a venomous snake.

After a few seconds, Mr. K continued, “If you prefer not to disclose what you have and what you’re after, you can write down your desired transaction in advance, and my attendant will copy it onto a portable blackboard for all participants to see.

If you don't think it matters, you can make your request on the spot.

"Likewise, at the gathering, you can complete transactions through my attendant or directly with the other party.

"Remember, transactions carry risks. I can't guarantee the authenticity of all items, materials, or information. Of course, you can opt to pay me to notarize them, effectively reducing the risk."

A Notary's power? Lumian recalled Aurore's grimoire.

This was Sequence 6 of the Sun pathway, and most Beyonders in this pathway belonged to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

Given this, Lumian suspected Mr. K might not be a Notary, but rather possess a related mystical item.

Lumian quickly collected himself and asked Mr. K, "May I write down my requirements now?"

Mr. K nodded and gestured towards a desk on the right side of the room.

"Write them there. My attendant will collect them."

Lumian approached the brown desk, adorned with Psychic, Lotus, Arcane, and other magazines. He unfolded a fragrant letter and picked up a dark-red fountain pen. After some thought, he wrote:

"1. I possess a damaged Beyonder weapon. Seeking someone capable of repairing it. Price negotiable.

"2. Buying information on a peculiar creature. This female-looking entity is suspected to be a Spirit Body. It has long turquoise hair that envelops its body and exudes an alluring aura. It can induce erotic dreams with itself as the central figure. Additional details unknown. Reward depends on the value of information provided, ranging from 10 to 100 verl d'or."

Lumian considered adding a third point about a Provoker's acting experience but decided against it after some thought.

He remembered Aurore mentioning acting techniques, the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation, and other mysticism knowledge in his nightmare. Such knowledge wasn't common among ordinary Beyonders. And he was currently impersonating a newcomer who had just entered the Beyonder world due to a disaster, seeking more knowledge and resources.

If he were to write the word "acting," Mr. K would surely grow suspicious.

Of course, Lumian didn't think of it as a pretense. He genuinely was a novice who had entered the Beyonder world following a disaster and sought more knowledge and resources. However, his involvement in the original disaster was quite high-

level, allowing him to encounter powerful figures like Madam Magician. As a result, he possessed extensive high-end knowledge but lacked common sense, relying on Aurore's grimoire to fill the gaps.

Having set down the letter and pen, Lumian left with Osta and entered a room at the end of the corridor.

The room appeared to be a salon. Sofas, chairs, a round table, a coffee table, barstools, and other furnishings were arranged casually, creating a relaxed atmosphere.

Several gathering attendees had already arrived. Some wore black robes and hoods that nearly covered their faces. Others donned clown or devil makeup, while a few wore crude or intricate masks.

For a moment, Lumian felt as if he had entered a masquerade ball.

He and Osta Trul took separate seats after entering separately.

Lumian chose a barstool, almost tempted to order a glass of absinthe to complete the look.

Soon enough, Mr. K entered and settled into the armchair reserved for the organizer. His masked and gloved attendants brought in a portable blackboard filled with transaction requests.

The first thing Lumian noticed was a request for Beyonder characteristics.

"Warrior pathway Sequence 8 Pugilist Beyonder characteristic, 15,000 verl d'or. Negotiable."

A Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristic selling for 15,000 verl d'or or more? Lumian was initially stunned, then overwhelmed by heartache and regret, as if he longed to drink from the Fountain of Oblivion.

He had just killed Margot, a Sequence 8 Provoker of the Hunter pathway!

Playing it safe, Lumian hadn't harassed Margot until the Montsouris ghost attacked, leaving the battlefield early.

While he had gained over 1,000 verl d'or from Margot through the fate exchange, it paled in comparison to the worth of the Provoker Beyonder characteristics.

Moments later, Lumian barely pulled himself together.

His actions had been the best course. If he had continued to pester Margot, something might have gone awry or drawn the authorities' attention. While Margot would still be dead, he could have landed in another crisis.

Lumian then examined the other transaction details.

“One Elf’s Dark Leaf, 180 verl d’or.”

“Two pages of Emperor Roselle’s original diary. 300 verl d’or.”

“Sequence 6 Baron of Corruption potion formula, 65,000 verl d’or.”

“…”

As Lumian scanned the list, he understood why his sister Aurore was so extravagant with her spending.

“Let’s begin,” Mr. K rasped, scanning the room.

His attendants read the entries aloud one by one. Some went unanswered, while others were discreetly finalized through the attendants.

Lumian observed quietly, intent on familiarizing himself with these situations and gathering intel.

As the gathering neared its end, the attendant by the portable blackboard finally announced Lumian’s first request.

Silence ensued.

After more than ten seconds, a man lounging in a corner divan snickered.

“Most of those skilled in restoring mystical items and Beyonder weapons are found in the God of Steam and Machinery Church. Try looking there.”

His face was smeared with oil paint, as if he were masquerading as a savage from the Southern Continent’s forests.

Ignoring the unfunny remark, Mr. K’s attendant relayed Lumian’s second request.

The gathering’s attendees exchanged bewildered glances, as if this strange creature was news to them.

Just a bunch of clueless Low-Sequence Beyonders… Lumian inwardly scoffed in disappointment.

Just then, the man who had joked earlier shared, “This brings something to mind. Heh heh, here’s a freebie.

“Where the Srenzo River meets the Ryan River downstream, there’s a town called Aunett. Many middle-class Trier folks enjoy sailing and swimming there.

“Early last year, or maybe earlier, three consecutive female deaths occurred. They died of weakness from overindulgence, with no known partners, secret or otherwise. Their only shared trait was telling friends about the vivid, alluring dreams they’d been having recently.”

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Chapter 140 - 140 Painting

140 Painting

The situation bears a resemblance to Charlie's case, but with a crucial difference: these victims are all women, while Charlie is a man…

Could it be that the strange entity believed to be Susanna Mattise isn't constrained by gender? Or is there another, male counterpart to the creature?

The latter seems more probable, given that all three victims in Aunett were female and no males had been targeted.

Yes, there are distinctions between the three women and Charlie. None of them had a partner, either openly or secretly, and Charlie had become Madame Alice's lover not long after invoking Susanna Mattise. If that hadn't happened, would he have met the same fate as the three victims, drained of life by overindulgence?

Had Madame Alice been a sacrificial substitute? Or had that been merely the beginning?

Lumian pieced together a theory based on the information provided by the man with the painted face.

He hoped the authorities would take this case seriously and not rest until Susanna Mattise had been utterly vanquished.

As for whether the authorities would suspect Beyonders hiding among Charlie's friends due to the letter, Lumian wasn't too concerned. He had intentionally obscured Charlie's information and circumstances in the letter, even inserting a small mistake in a seemingly insignificant detail. The writer appeared to harbor a deep grudge against Susanna Mattise, having tracked her for an extended period, and sought to use Charlie's situation to enlist the help of the authorities for revenge. As a result, the focus was more on Susanna Mattise's issue, with a limited understanding of Charlie.

After the assembled participants discussed the strange case in Aunett, Mr. K's attendant unveiled an object shrouded in a black cloth.

Another attendant introduced, "This is a painting from a friend of one of our participants.

"He was a fellow Beyonder who met an untimely and bizarre end two months ago. Before his death, he created this painting."

With a swift motion, the attendant removed the black cloth, revealing the deceased Beyonder's final masterpiece.

The oil painting was a riot of vivid colors, weaving a surreal and mesmerizing scene.

Towering green weeds reached for the heavens, a golden sun lay hidden in a well, a blood-red river cascaded from the sky, a shadowy figure danced, and white skulls coalesced into clouds…

Merely glancing at the painting left Lumian feeling disoriented.

The attendant who had introduced the painting elaborated, "This artwork bears a potent psychic imprint. It affects the minds of all who view it, inducing confusion and vertigo to varying degrees. Prolonged exposure could even result in mental illness.

"According to the letters and diary entries left by the painting's creator, it may hold clues to the essence of reality and the origins of mysticism.

"This could also be the key to understanding the true nature of his strange demise.

"Any participant interested in studying the painting can negotiate a price."

You want to sell something like this for money? I wouldn't take it even if you offered it for free! Lumian grumbled internally, tearing his gaze away.

He wanted nothing to do with anything that concealed the truth, essence, or origin of the world. As Aurore had once said, one shouldn't look at or study things one shouldn't see or understand.

It was apparent that most of the gathering's participants were reluctant to spend money on such a foreboding painting shrouded in mystery. Ultimately, Mr. K's attendant put it away, once again veiling it with the black cloth.

Following that, the gathering transitioned into an open discussion stage. Attendees engaged in casual conversation about rumors and legends, careful to hide any details of their true identities.

At 10:15, Mr. K declared the gathering over, and the participants dispersed in groups.

As he departed, Lumian detected the organizer sizing him up, scrutinizing his every move.

Will he send someone to follow and investigate me? Lumian couldn't help but wonder.

Rather than being concerned, he was eager for it to happen.

Aside from occasionally summoning a messenger, his behavior was unremarkable. He could withstand any scrutiny!

As long as he refrained from contacting Madam Magician, Lumian believed Mr. K would soon receive an almost entirely truthful report—Ciel, a wild Beyonder lacking common sense in many areas, was suspected to hail from Cordu and sought Guillaume Bénet and his associates. He was also a wanted man.

In this scenario, if Lumian demonstrated his skills and extreme attitude, it wouldn't be long before he received an invitation from Mr. K to join his ranks and become a part of the organization behind him.

Sometimes, "inadvertently" revealing one's vulnerabilities and true circumstances was an effective means of gaining trust.

With that, Lumian and Osta found a concealed corner at 19 Rue Scheer, where they removed their disguises before returning to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

As he made his way towards Rue Anarchie, Lumian's brow furrowed in confusion.

He hadn't noticed anyone tailing him.

Is it because Mr. K has no plans to investigate me, or had the person shadowing me been so skilled and uniquely gifted that I had failed to detect their presence? Lumian pondered the possibilities but ultimately pushed them to the back of his mind.

In any case, he wouldn't fear an investigation, unless Mr. K was in league with the Poison Spur Mob.

Upon entering Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian noted that he was still early. He crossed the now pristine lobby and descended into the basement bar.

Before he could take in the scene, Charlie's exuberant voice reached his ears.

"Can you believe it? Just three hours ago, I was at police headquarters, accused of murder. Now, here I am, drinking and singing with all of you!

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've had an incredible experience like no other. I bet none of you can top it…"

The apprentice attendant leaped onto a small round table, beer bottle in hand, and addressed the surrounding patrons.

His short brown hair was disheveled, as if it hadn't been tended to in days, and stubble was evident around his mouth.

Already? Lumian had anticipated it would take Charlie another two or three days to be released.

Spotting Lumian from the table, Charlie waved his short arm and called out to the crowd, “I’ll share that even stranger encounter with you all later!”

Donning a linen shirt and black pants, he hopped off the table and jogged to the bar counter, beer bottle in hand. He took a seat beside Lumian and said to the ponytailed bartender, Pavard Neeson, “A glass of absinthe! Thank you.”

Turning to Lumian, he said, “This one’s on me.”

Lumian accepted the offer with a calm smile.

“You’re looking pretty good.”

“Of course. At least I don’t have to worry about being hanged. I’d hate for thousands to gather around me as I die, considering how nobody cares about me when I’m alive,” Charlie said, relief evident on his face.

Trier’s citizens reveled in witnessing the execution of death row inmates.

Whenever someone faced the gallows or a firing squad, the streets would overflow with onlookers.

In the classical era before Emperor Roselle, there even existed a custom centered around this fascination: En route from the prison to the gallows, if any bystander agreed to marry the condemned, their sentence would be commuted, reduced, or even entirely absolved.

“Are you completely fine?” Lumian inquired further.

Charlie took a swig of beer and scanned the room. Lowering his voice, he said, “I can’t divulge the specifics. I signed a pledge, a notarized pledge. You can’t imagine how powerful that is…”

Charlie caught himself and continued, “The only downside is that I’ve lost my job again. That blasted foreman thinks I’ve tarnished the hotel’s image. No matter. I’ll pawn the diamond necklace tomorrow. The officers have already returned it to me. That money will tide me over for quite some time. I can treat the café waiters on Rue des Blouses Blanches to drinks. I’ll surely find a better job!”

He wanted to add, “Let’s go together when the time comes,” but recalling Ciel’s nerve and capabilities, he quietly discarded the idea.

Lumian sipped the absinthe the bartender had slid his way and gestured for Charlie to join him in an empty corner.

Once certain that the noise around them was sufficient to drown out their conversation and that no one was eavesdropping, Lumian asked, “Has the situation with Susanna Matisse been resolved?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie shook his head. “They did a lot of things, but I can’t tell you.”

“Did they promise to provide protection for a period of time?” Lumian asked thoughtfully.

Charlie replied awkwardly, “I can’t tell you.”

Lumian grinned, retorting, “Seems like there is.”

If they hadn’t promised protection, the corresponding words wouldn’t exist and wouldn’t be restricted by the confidentiality pledge.

“Uh…” Charlie hadn’t expected Ciel to guess so accurately.

Lumian inquired, “Did they tell you anything? Share what you can.”

Charlie pondered for a moment and said, “They told me not to panic if I had that dream again. I’m to head to the nearest cathedral after dawn. You don’t know about the Eternal Blazing Sun’s cathedral, do you? I’m now a true believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun!”

Lumian expressionlessly raised his right hand and traced a triangle on his chest.

“…” Charlie fell silent.

After drinking with Charlie, Lumian returned to Room 207 and continued studying Aurore’s grimoire.

He washed up before midnight, lay on the bed, and drifted off to sleep.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Lumian was jolted awake by an insistent knocking on the door.

Who could it be? Frowning, he gripped Fallen Mercury and cautiously approached the door, cracking it open.

Charlie stood outside.

Still clad in a linen shirt, black pants, and strapless leather shoes, his face was ashen and fear-stricken.

Upon seeing Lumian, he appeared to regain his composure. Nearly losing control of his voice, he stammered in terror, “I dreamed of that woman again!”

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Chapter 141 - 141 “Hostage”

141 “Hostage”

In the dimly lit corridor, bathed in the eerie glow of the crimson moon, Charlie’s voice echoed, sending shivers down one’s spine.

Dreaming of Susanna Mattise again? Lumian’s alarm gave way to surging anger.

Are you out of your damn mind? If you had that dream again, go to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and find a clergyman! I’m not your father to have you report your wet dreams to me!

Casting a glance at Charlie, whose face was a mask of terror, Lumian reined in his emotions and spoke in a low voice, “Relax. This was bound to happen. For now, get some sleep and seek help from the nearest cathedral at dawn.”

Charlie appeared on the verge of tears.

!!

“B-but, in my dream, she said if I dared to seek help from the Church, she’d kill me on my way to the cathedral!”

“You communicated in the dream?” Lumian was taken aback.

Charlie nodded frantically.

“Yes. Before, she never spoke in my dreams. She only satisfied me, warm and gentle. This time, she warned me. She warned me!”

Could it be that Susanna Mattise hasn’t fully transformed into a monstrous creature and still possesses some level of intelligence? Lumian’s thoughts raced, and he felt a pang of sympathy for Charlie.

If Charlie couldn’t get help from official Beyonders, he’d likely end up like the three female victims in Aunett Town, lost in dreams until drained of life.

Hold on, are the official Beyonders handling Charlie’s situation so carelessly? Didn’t they consider the possibility of Charlie being killed by Susanna Mattise? Lumian instantly thought of Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.

None of them would dismiss the case so casually, merely instructing the victim to rush to a cathedral if he faced any issues.

Remembering how the clergyman from the Church stayed with the lunatic upstairs and protected him after encountering the Montsouris ghost, Lumian grew suspicious.

The official Beyonders overseeing Charlie's case intentionally downplayed the threat posed by Susanna Mattise, allowing him to return to the motel. They claimed the situation was mostly resolved and instructed him to seek help from the cathedral if any issues arose—all to lure Susanna Mattise into revealing herself again!

Realizing this, Lumian looked at Charlie and said coolly, "If you trust me, return to your room, lie down, close your eyes, and sleep until dawn. Don't worry, it'll all be sorted out."

Lumian appeared unruffled, but inwardly, he was cursing.

Get your ass back to the fifth floor! By now, the official Beyonders monitoring the area should've detected the anomaly and be preparing to act. Why are you standing in front of my door? Are you trying to get me caught?

"I, I…" Charlie hesitated, his eyes filled with terror.

Will everything truly be resolved if I do nothing?

Lumian exhaled and forced a smile.

Lumian resorted to coaxing and deception, desperate for Charlie to leave the second floor.

Charlie's face brightened, and he exclaimed excitedly, "Thank you, thank you!"

The moment he spoke, Lumian caught the scent of vegetation, tainted with an unsettling aroma.

In an instant, greenish-brown vines and branches unfurled from the walls, ceiling, and floor. They sealed the windows and doors of the other rooms.

At the staircase, a woman's voice, both beguiling and unnerving, rang out.

"Charlie, are you really going to betray me?"

Charlie's eyes widened in shock as he turned toward the sound.

He saw the woman from his dreams, her turquoise hair cascading from her head to the floor, reaching out to the surrounding walls and ceiling above, melding with vines and branches.

Without her turquoise hair shrouding her body, Susanna Mattise stood entirely exposed, her beautiful curves on display. Scattered among her flesh were flower buds and tree warts—some red, some white, some green, and some brown.

As she spoke, the vivid flower buds and bluish tree warts opened and closed, oozing a foul-smelling, viscous liquid.

The repulsive scene left Charlie feeling as if he'd plunged into a nightmare. He stood there, trembling, his mind a haze.

Susanna Mattise looked at Charlie, her eyes brimming with affection.

"Have you forgotten our blissful moments in the dream? Charlie, I'm your wife."

Snapping out of his stupor, Charlie nearly crumbled.

"No! No!"

You idiot! Just say something to placate Susanna! Lumian cursed himself for not reacting quickly enough to silence Charlie.

Susanna's expression frosted over.

"Then stay with me forever."

At her words, the terror in Charlie's eyes vanished, replaced by infatuation as he eagerly moved toward the monstrous being.

A moist flower bud on Susanna's lower abdomen opened unnaturally wide, unlike the other flower buds and tree warts that closed slowly.

It seemed to await Charlie.

Simultaneously, Susanna glared at Lumian, her voice seething with hatred, "It's all your fault. You incited Charlie to betray me!"

"Why don't you take a look in the mirror and see how horrifying and repulsive you've become? If I were Charlie, I would've kicked you out of my dream from the start!" Lumian's instincts told him pleading for mercy was futile. Instead, he chose to retaliate and provoke Susanna, hoping to uncover her weakness.

Merely standing near the bizarre creature, Lumian felt a mix of exhilaration and dread. He longed for her, yet resisted, as if caught in a whirlpool of desire, consumed by an overpowering sense of helplessness.

This proved she was far stronger than him!

Lumian cursed inwardly as his thoughts raced, searching for a way to buy time.

He was sure the official Beyonders would arrive soon!

What in the world is this monster?

Why does she believe she's Charlie's wife?

Wife…

In that instant, as Susanna Mattise screeched, incensed by his words, an idea struck Lumian.

As her scream filled the air, vines and branches surged toward Lumian, amplifying the fear lurking in his heart to the point of near-collapse.

His legs weakened, and his body trembled uncontrollably.

Summoning his ruthlessness, Lumian managed to extend his right hand, grabbing Charlie, who was about to rush toward the creature.

With Fallen Mercury in his left hand, he pressed the sinister dirk to Charlie's throat.

Susanna Mattise looked bewildered, her anger palpable.

"What are you doing?"

Lumian smirked menacingly.

"I forgot to mention, my Beyonder weapon is called Cursed Blade.

"A single cut drawing blood will curse his entire family to death, including his wife.

"And you're Charlie's wife!"

Recalling the lunatic upstairs, Lumian suspected that the Montsouris ghost would target not only one's immediate family but also their spouse.

Although he didn't understand how a spouse was determined in mysticism, since Susanna Mattise claimed to be Charlie's wife, he treated her as such!

Of course, Lumian knew allowing Fallen Mercury to curse Charlie with the fate of the Montsouris ghost wouldn't immediately impact Susanna Mattise. It wouldn't affect the present situation at all.

He gambled that Susanna Mattise didn't know this, and that she could sense the danger in Fallen Mercury.

It was a bluff!

Susanna Mattise's expression froze, and the attacking vines and branches halted midair.

Her jade-green eyes radiated menace.

Lumian's vision shifted. He saw Guillaume Bénet, the hawk-nosed padre clad in a white robe adorned with golden threads.

Suppressed hatred erupted like a volcano.

Lumian released Charlie and advanced toward the "Guillaume Bénet" he had locked onto.

But before him stood only Susanna Mattise.

In that instant, Charlie, his face awash with infatuation, saw Lumian approaching his "wife" with a dirk. He lunged at the assailant, shouting, "Don't hurt her!"

Lumian snapped to his senses, realizing Guillaume Bénet had morphed into Susanna Mattise, her flower buds and tree warts blossoming one by one!

She controlled my emotions? In his shock, Lumian twisted violently, seizing Charlie again and pressing Fallen Mercury to his throat.

Susanna Mattise didn't conceal her disappointment. After a moment's silence, she parted her red lips.

Suddenly, the creature halted, staring solemnly at the wall near Rue Anarchie in Auberge du Coq Doré.

In the next second, her turquoise hair retracted, and the vines and branches disintegrated, vanishing.

Wh— The official Beyonders are here? Lumian watched Susanna Mattise's figure burrow through the wall and disappear from the corridor.

He released Charlie and shook him, urging him to wake up. He quickly instructed,

"Lie down on the second-floor stairs and keep your eyes closed until someone wakes you!"

With that, Lumian pushed Charlie and retreated to his room, closing the wooden door and feigning sleep, like the other tenants.

As Susanna departed, the obsession faded from Charlie's eyes. When Lumian jolted him back to reality, he had no choice but to follow Lumian's directions. He jogged to the staircase leading to the ground floor, lay down, and closed his eyes, feigning unconsciousness.

Almost simultaneously, a red hue filled Charlie and Lumian's vision, as though the sun had risen prematurely, heralding the day.

…

Minutes later, a golden sword formed from light stabbed into the ground of Rue Anarchie, skewering a writhing turquoise vine.

“Is it resolved?” A young man with the Sun Sacred Emblem pinned to his chest asked the one brandishing the sword.

He was a rugged man with blond hair, golden eyebrows, and a golden beard, wearing a brown coat adorned with two rows of golden buttons.

He exhaled and declared, “We’ve resolved it for now, but unless we find the origin of this evil spirit, it’s only a matter of time before she regenerates there.”

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Chapter 142 - 142 Mother Tree

142 Mother Tree

“Evil spirits can reform again?” The young man bearing the Sun Sacred Emblem on his chest inquired, astonished.

From his mysticism knowledge and experience gained through case files, he knew that unless an evil spirit possessed unique abilities, purification equated to total annihilation.

Such soul-type entities were either the offspring of powerful Beyonders’ deaths or vengeful spirits that managed to break through various constraints. The mightiest could even wield a degree of godhood, but resurrection and rebirth were not among their traits.

The blond man, clad in a double-breasted brown coat, straightened up and eyed the dissipating, writhing vines. After some thought, he said, “Evil spirits can have unique distinctions. Under specific conditions, they rely on an object to be born. This object often lies at the heart of their territory.

“As long as this object remains intact, the evil spirit, even if not entirely purified, will gradually reform within the corresponding area.”

Evil spirits would assimilate their birthplaces, merging with the spirit world and the Underworld to obtain the power necessary to maintain their existence. Otherwise, they would slowly weaken until they vanished completely.

In essence, evil spirits had a fixed range of activity and couldn’t wander far from their birthplaces. This was their “territory.”

The young man donned in the Sun Sacred Emblem and a white robe adorned with golden threads roughly grasped the reasoning. He furrowed his brow and said, “We’ve been searching for days, yet we haven’t found the birthplace of the evil spirit, Susanna Matisse.”

Logically, Susanna Matisse couldn’t stray far from her territory. If official Beyonders carefully searched Rue Anarchie and its vicinity, they would surely locate the evil spirit’s birthplace and destroy the object it depended on.

However, this was Trier, a city with not only an above-ground area but also an underground section. Another Rue Anarchie and Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman mirrored the area above, with numerous obscure paths and empty spaces.

More crucially, deeper underground, lay Trier from the Fourth Epoch. Even for official Beyonders, it was a perilous place they scarcely comprehended.

As a deacon of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman's Inquisition, Angoulême de Fran?ois had never understood why Trier had been rebuilt atop the original site, right above the sunken Trier of the Fourth Epoch, in the late era.

Although geographically ideal, this decision had spawned countless troubles over the ensuing thousand years.

The Purifiers weren't incapable of resolving the Beyonder incidents; they just couldn't get to the root of the problem, hidden within the underground ruins of the Fourth Epoch's Trier.

Rumor had it that not even Demigods dared or were willing to venture into those depths.

Angoulême sheathed his golden longsword, which seemed to be condensed light, into a grayish-white, steam-powered humanoid head contraption, allowing it to sink into the corresponding "vertebrae."

Dark liquid seemed to fill the device.

A man in a white suit, yellow vest, and light-colored shirt, adorned with the Sun Sacred Emblem, emerged from Auberge du Coq Doré.

His light-yellow hair was neatly combed, skin-colored tape covered the bridge of his nose, and his lips were thick. A hint of a Southern Continent ancestry showed through his slightly brown skin.

"Deacon, I've spoken to Charlie Collent," he reported to Angoulême de Fran?ois.

Angoulême touched the golden button on his brown coat, asking, "Is he alright?"

The brown-skinned man shook his head, replying, "We arrived just in time. He wasn't physically harmed.

"According to him, after he dreamed of Susanna Matisse again, although she warned him, he still chose to seek help. He was intercepted by Susanna Matisse on the second floor of the motel and almost became one with her forever. At least, that's what she said.

This development seemed normal and reasonable, aligning with the details provided by the Purifier elite team led by Angoulême. Neither Angoulême nor the other two Purifiers had any doubts.

In their understanding, Charlie's request for help was in accordance with their instructions to head to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.

Angoulême surveyed the unusually quiet Rue Anarchie and nodded slightly.

“For now, let’s put Charlie Collent aside. But if we don’t find Susanna Mattise’s birthplace in two weeks, consider arranging a civilian job for him and telling him the truth.”

This was the standard procedure used by official Beyonders to protect ordinary people who had yet to fully escape the influence of Beyonder events.

Of course, it often appeared they had resolved the problem and informed the victim to live peacefully, only for the person to die mysteriously weeks, months, or years later.

Angoulême continued, “We have two priorities. First, investigate this area, including the underground, to find Susanna Mattise’s birthplace. Second, locate the person who warned us with the letter. He seems to have deep knowledge of Susanna Mattise.”

Before releasing Charlie, Angoulême and his team had secretly investigated Auberge du Coq Doré but found no suspicious areas that could be the birthplace of the evil spirit.

Additionally, they had used Beyonder methods to verify Charlie’s encounter and confession. They confirmed that the victim had interacted with ordinary people from the moment he prayed to Susanna Matisse until he was arrested by the police.

That was why Angoulême suggested not to worry about Charlie’s situation for the time being.

As for the sender, he had impressive methods and extensive anti-divination and anti-tracking experience. He had chosen to use a spirit world creature to write and send the letter.

It was worth noting that even when using the same descriptive incantation to summon a spirit world creature, a different one would likely appear each time.

The challenge with using just a three-line description was that it could potentially match hundreds of thousands of spirit world creatures, if not more. What they could summon each time relied solely on chance.

Without a corresponding medium and a description that highlighted the subject’s unique traits, it was nearly impossible to zero in on the target spirit using the incantation alone. Most spirit world creatures simply weren’t distinctive enough.

Angoulême had previously sought the help of colleagues adept in such matters. Employing the letter as a medium, he tried summoning the associated spirit world creature, hoping to glean any clues from it. Alas, whether it was the letter’s transcriber, author, or sender, they came up empty-handed.

The issue could have been a flaw in the descriptive statement, or perhaps the corresponding spirit world creature sensed their ill intentions and refused the

summoning.

Even with a flawless summoning ritual, it could still fail if the spirit world creatures fitting the description declined to respond. Only those Sequences skilled in summoning could significantly boost the odds or even force the issue. Naturally, Beyonders rarely faced such obstacles. Their three-line descriptions cast a wide net, ensnaring numerous spirit world creatures, with a handful always eager to enter the real world and absorb some spirituality.

…

Lumian feigned sleep, poised to flee at a moment's notice.

It wasn't until the nearby cathedral clock struck six that he allowed himself a sigh of relief.

Seems like the battle between the official Beyonders and Susanna Mattise has ended. They didn't even realize I briefly confronted her… Lumian rolled out of bed and rubbed his face.

He couldn't be certain if the official Beyonders had completely neutralized Susanna Mattise or if this ordeal was truly over.

Recalling Susanna's intense hatred for him, Lumian knew he couldn't rely on hope alone.

He decided to write a letter to Madam Magician, reporting his encounter with Mr. K and inquiring about Susanna Mattise's nature and weaknesses.

For good measure, he also planned to ask Hela, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's vice president—after all, Madam Magician wasn't all-knowing.

After penning the two letters and tidying the room, Lumian summoned two messengers at ten-minute intervals, ensuring each took the correct letter.

By the time he finished washing up and returned to Room 207, there were already two replies waiting silently on the wooden table.

Wow, Madam Magician is quick too. Did the messengers run into each other? If so, what would they talk about? Lumian muttered, picking up one of the replies.

The letter was from Hela.

"Similar cases have occurred in the Northern and Southern Continents. Men and women often dreamed of the opposite sex and engaged in intimate acts, ultimately dying from exhaustion.

"If the victims have partners or lovers, these innocents are killed one by one by creatures like Susanna Mattise. These creatures seem to believe they're the dreamer's spouse.

“Such creatures are said to possess powerful abilities on par with Mid-Sequence Beyonders.

“Some details suggest Susanna may have already died, becoming a vengeful or evil spirit…”

It is indeed quite powerful… Lumian recalled his encounter the previous night, realizing that without Fallen Mercury’s deterrence, Charlie as a “hostage,” and Susanna’s conviction that she was Charlie’s wife, he might have been defeated within a minute.

After burning Hela’s reply with a flame conjured from his spirituality, Lumian unfolded Madam Magician’s letter.

“I’m unsure whether to congratulate or commiserate with you. Your chances of encountering an evil god’s Blessed seem higher than those of ordinary Beyonders. This may be due to the corruption sealed within you.

“It’s difficult to explain this phenomenon using the law of convergence of Beyonder characteristics. It’s more like repulsive forces rejected by this world, attracting each other.

“That’s my theory. I can’t guarantee its accuracy. If I’m wrong, don’t forget to inform me and provide the correct answer.

“Based on your account, I suspect Susanna was once a believer of an evil god, who bestowed her with strength equivalent to a Sequence 5.

“That evil god goes by the pseudonym Mother Tree of Desire in this world. Don’t attempt to understand Her, let alone guess Her true and complete title.

“Susanna is likely a Fallen Tree Spirit or Spirit of Lust, also known as Baby Cupid in some regions. They can appear as men or women, engaging in intimate acts within dreams and absorbing the victim’s energy. Over time, their possessiveness leads them to believe they’re the victim’s spouse, driving them to kill the victim’s partner or lover in a fit of jealousy.

“However, Susanna also exhibited traits of a soul-type entity. It’s highly plausible she met her demise in an accident or failed to endure the boon, morphing into an evil spirit. She grew increasingly paranoid, clinging to her instincts.”

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Chapter 143 - 143 Lie

143 Lie

Having briefly outlined the nature and territorial tendencies of malevolent spirits, the woman known as Magician continued,

“Though Susanna Mattise’s power is on par with a Sequence 5, it’s not impossible for you to handle her. You could use the dirk on Charlie and swap your fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost with his. After the Montsouris ghost kills Susanna Mattise, you can transfer the fate of encountering it back into the knife.

“Alright, that was a joke. This plan has far too many uncertainties. It’s virtually impossible to pull off.

“Firstly, the Montsouris ghost might only kill those who come across it.

“Secondly, even if the Montsouris ghost does kill Susanna Mattise, you won’t know. You wouldn’t be able to change fate in time without affecting Charlie.

“Thirdly, Charlie shouldn’t be an orphan. His parents and siblings might still be alive. No one knows if the Montsouris ghost will leave Trier to kill.

“Fourthly, the Montsouris ghost might not be able to kill Susanna Mattise.

“Fifthly, Charlie himself admitted that he and Susanna are mystically bound as husband and wife.

“I’m saying all of this mainly to discourage you from going down that path. Using Charlie as a ‘hostage’ suggests that you’re inclined to take such risks.

“Actually, this situation presents both a crisis and an opportunity.

“For you, the best solution is to ask Mr. K for help in dealing with the threat posed by Susanna Mattise.

“Remember, asking for help is an effective way to build relationships and earn someone’s trust. Of course, the other party must be willing and capable.

“You can showcase your potential and make Mr. K see that you’re valuable.

“I wish you the best of luck. I hope you can quickly gain Mr. K’s initial trust and join that organization.”

Lumian's initial reaction to the letter was that Madam Magician tended to ramble and digress. She seemed to enjoy finding lofty excuses and often entertained far-fetched notions bordering on absurdity. This contrasted sharply with Madam Hela's succinct and polished reply.

This writing style must be Madam Magician's trademark… Lumian pursed his lips, summoned his spiritual energy, and ignited a flame, burning the paper in his hand.

After reading the two letters, he discarded the idea of using Fallen Mercury to resolve his issue with Susanna Mattise. Their fates had been entwined for more than just a brief moment. It couldn't be as simple as erasing the fate of encountering the Montsouris ghost.

In comparison, seeking Mr. K's assistance was indeed an effective solution Lumian hadn't considered.

This could quickly bridge the gap between him and Mr. K, fulfilling Madam Magician's mission.

After contemplating for a moment and determining how to approach Mr. K and demonstrate his worth, Lumian changed into a grayish-blue worker's uniform, put on a dark-blue cap, and left Room 207.

Upon reaching the ground floor, Lumian saw Charlie lingering near the entrance, wearing a linen shirt and black pants.

"What are you up to?" he asked with a grin.

Charlie forced a smile.

The establishment's official name was Pawnbroker Shop or Pawnshop Company.

"To the pawnshop?" Lumian sidled up to Charlie and lowered his voice. "Are you alright?"

Charlie glanced around and gave a bitter smile.

"They said there's no problem this time. Susanna, that evil spirit, has been purified.

"Whether there's an issue or not, life has to go on. Haha, I heard that from a hotel guest. Sounds pretty sophisticated, right?

"Anyway, for people like us, a day without work puts us on the brink of financial ruin. We'd soon be hungry again. I have to pawn the diamond necklace for cash. You know, only cash gives people a sense of security. Clothes and jewelry can't do that. Even food is lacking!"

At this point, Charlie's excitement grew.

“Madame Alice said the necklace is worth 1,500 verl d’or. If I pawn it, I should get around 1,000.

“My god. I’ve never seen 1,000 verl d’or before. Even if I become an attendant foreman, it’d take me years, maybe more than a decade, to save that much!

“When it’s time, we’ll have lunch at a café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. I want DuVar broth, coarse salt beef in red wine sauce, and apple tenderloin!”

Did you learn nothing else at H?tel du Cygne Blanc, just the names of dishes? Lumian grumbled and asked thoughtfully, “You want me to protect you?”

Charlie laughed.

“I’d be scared carrying that much money alone. Ciel, you might not have had that experience yet—thinking everyone’s a thief who’ll rob you on the streets.

“I felt that way when I got the necklace. I was so nervous, I nearly passed out. Can you imagine?”

“Yes.” Lumian smiled. “I probably won’t have that experience. Not now, not ever, because I’m the one who makes others think I want to rob them.”

Take Margot, for example, who had just forked over more than 1,000 verl d’or, nearly enough to buy the diamond necklace!

Charlie’s smile froze.

After a few seconds, he forced a smile and said, “That’s why I want you to come with me to the pawnshop.”

He had seriously doubted Ciel’s means of making money. His neighbor was clearly capable and smart, but he wasn’t rushing to find a job. He roamed around daily, seemingly without money troubles, but lived at Auberge du Coq Doré, not H?tel du Cygne Blanc.

Remembering how Ciel had posed as a lawyer to infiltrate the police station, provided vital information, and helped him survive Susanna Mattise’s threat, Charlie felt it was a small concern.

Even if Ciel’s a thief, robber, or con artist, he’s one who risked his life to help me!

Pleased with Charlie’s apprehensive expression, Lumian asked, grinning, “Which pawnshop are you going to?”

“I heard the pawnshops in Quartier de l’Observatoire offer better prices.” Charlie had already decided.

Lumian nodded.

“I’m actually headed to Quartier de l’Observatoire.”

He planned to ask Osta Trul for Mr. K’s contact information.

Charlie was thrilled. He spent a whopping 1 verl d’or to treat Lumian to a barbecue pie, cream bun, and plum wine. Naturally, this included his own portion.

Lumian graciously accepted.

Exiting Rue Anarchie, Charlie winced when he saw Lumian heading straight for the public carriage sign.

He glanced around, making sure no one was nearby, and whispered,

“Last night, you said your blade was called the Cursed Blade. Will anyone cut by it really have their entire family die?”

Before meeting Susanna Mattise, Charlie never believed in such things. Even if he had heard about them, they were just fodder for boasting and tall tales. But now, he couldn’t help but wonder if Ciel truly wielded a mystical weapon.

Lumian turned to Charlie and grinned.

“Want to give it a try?”

Charlie shuddered and smiled sheepishly. “I believe you.”

“Do you? Well, I was just bluffing Susanna Mattise last night. I’m just an ordinary guy. If I hadn’t, I’d be dead!” Lumian said, still smiling. “Doesn’t the Cursed Blade story I made up ring a bell? You’ve heard of the Montsouris ghost legend when that maniac was having his bout of clarity, right?”

Charlie’s eyes widened in realization.

That’s it! It’s a spin on the Montsouris ghost legend!

Ciel is a master of deception. An ordinary person managed to fool that malevolent spirit, Susanna Mattise, and saved our lives!

I only spin tall tales in bars and occasionally lie. I can’t even begin to compare to him.

He’s got guts and smarts. A person like that is destined to make it big!

Seeing that Charlie genuinely believed the lie he’d just spun, Lumian did his best to keep a straight face.

He asked earnestly, “Are your parents still alive? Do you have siblings?”

"…" Charlie was taken aback and leaped to the side like a spooked rabbit. "Why do you ask?"

Could it be that the Cursed Blade is real? Is he trying to figure out which family members I have?

Lumian couldn't contain his laughter anymore.

"You're not actually scared, are you? Aren't you too easily pranked?"

Charlie slapped his forehead, exasperated with the thought of the Idiot Instrument.

He couldn't distinguish which of Ciel's words were false and which were true.

However, after being pranked, he felt even more certain that the Cursed Blade was fake and based on the Montsouris ghost legend.

Ciel loves using such fabrications to fool others, just like the Idiot Instrument.

Hmm… The Cursed Blade story is a good one. Now that it's mine, I'll use it at the bar tonight to spook people!

The two of them arrived at Quartier de l'Observatoire in a public carriage. Charlie asked for directions several times before finally finding Phil's Pawnbroker Shop.

Housed in a seven-story off-white building, it featured pillars, arches, relief sculptures, and large windows.

Etched above the grand entrance were the words: "Freedom, equality, fraternity"

Freedom to pawn any item; equality to discriminate against anyone who comes to pawn something? Fraternity to seize every opportunity to lowball prices? Lumian couldn't help but criticize.

How ridiculous for a pawnshop to carve the Republic's political slogan on their door?

Inside the hall, there were several counters, with rows of benches in front of them.

At the moment, dozens of people sat there, waiting for the clerk to appraise their items and call their number.

Charlie easily found an empty counter and handed over the diamond necklace. He received a slip with the item's name and corresponding number for appraisal.

Soon, Charlie's number was called from the counter.

He walked over with anticipation, only to return looking as if his spirit had been crushed.

Lumian, who was browsing newspapers in the hall, asked in confusion, “What’s wrong?”

Charlie spoke in a daze, his voice tinged with disappointment, “That necklace, that necklace is a fake. It’s only worth 12 verl d’or…”

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Chapter 144 - 144 Conditions

144 Conditions

Fake? Lumian's right eyebrow twitched, as if fate was mercilessly mocking Charlie.

Charlie had forsaken his fragile principles and bedded Madame Alice for days, only to get embroiled in a life-threatening lawsuit and lose his job as an apprentice attendant—all for a counterfeit diamond necklace?

For some reason, Lumian felt a sudden urge to defy fate.

This wasn't his problem, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

To hell with this inevitable destiny!

You mock me, so I'll mock and provoke you in return!

In that moment, Lumian began to grasp another aspect of the Provoker's acting principles, albeit crudely and imprecisely.

He eyed Charlie and asked thoughtfully, "Do you think Madam Alice lied to you, or did the pawnshop see your desperate situation, knowing you couldn't determine the necklace's authenticity, and use it as an excuse to offer the lowest possible price?"

"I-I don't know." Charlie was at a loss and in pain.

After a pause, he added with difficulty, "I suspect it's Madame Alice. Look, there are so many people here pawning their items. Appraisers handle dozens or hundreds of items every day, most of them valuable. They can't just lie to me, right?

"H-how could she…"

Charlie couldn't go on.

Can't pawnshops deceive everyone equally? Lowballing the offer as much as possible, especially for the pricey items? Lumian scoffed.

"Why not?

"Many wealthy people don't amass fortunes through kindness and hard work. If they can trick you with a fake, why give you the real deal?

“Maybe Madame Alice is one of those people. She might not even be that rich. She relied on staying at the H?tel du Cygne Blanc to dupe a gullible lad like you.”

Lumian didn’t distrust every rich person. Many had made their fortunes through talent, hard work, and opportunity—like Aurore.

Stung by Lumian’s words, Charlie’s face twisted with anger.

He muttered to himself bitterly, “That’s right. During this time, Madame Alice hasn’t even treated me to a big meal. She only calls me to her room at seven or eight at night for… service.”

You’re so naive. Are you really from Reem? Lumian couldn’t help but facepalm.

He stood up and said, “Get that necklace back. Let’s try another pawnshop. What if it’s real?”

Charlie was taken aback.

“Alright, alright!”

Lumian urged him, “Be vigilant. We can’t let them switch the necklace.”

“Yes.” Charlie tried his best to rally. “I’ve been studying that necklace daily recently and memorized every detail!”

After retrieving the diamond necklace, Lumian accompanied Charlie to two other pawnshops in Quartier de l’Observatoire.

The appraisal results were the same as before. The necklace was fake and worth only 11 to 15 verl d’or.

Charlie’s frustration mounted, and he crumbled.

Lumian glanced at him and consoled, “At least you can get a dozen verl d’or. It’ll last you more than a week. With the money, you can buy drinks for waiters at cafés on Rue des Blouses Blanches and ask them to help you find a new job.”

Including rent, Charlie spent about 1 verl d’or a day. If he skipped the underground bar, his expenses would be even less.

“Yeah…” Charlie sighed.

He was utterly disappointed. But after accepting reality, he found a glimmer of hope.

Lumian hesitated before suggesting, “We can’t dismiss other possibilities. For instance, the pawnshops around here might have secret ways of communicating. They could specifically target people like you—those who don’t dress well and pawn valuable items without proper documentation. How about taking the

necklace to a specialized jewelry shop for appraisal?"

"We'd have to pay a fee." Charlie's face clouded with worry.

If the appraisal confirmed its authenticity, that would be great. But if it turned out to be fake, his already meager assets would be reduced by a third or even half.

Lumian sighed and offered, "Hand me the diamond necklace, and I'll find a friend to appraise it for you—one who won't charge.

"You've still got some cash to get you through the day, right?"

"I have 2.6 verl d'or left." With hope in his eyes, Charlie handed the diamond necklace to Lumian.

As Lumian pocketed the necklace, he grinned and asked, "Are you not worried that the appraisal might prove it genuine, but I'll return a fake one to you and claim there's no issue with the pawnshops' assessment?"

"…" Charlie's face tensed once more.

After a moment, he exhaled and admitted, "I trust you. Besides, I've already written it off as a fake."

Lumian waved goodbye to Charlie and strode toward Place du Purgatoire.

…

Near the catacombs, Osta Trul occupied his customary seat facing the bonfire, clad in a hooded black robe.

Lumian approached and asked with a hint of amusement, "Don't you ever change areas?"

Osta chuckled and replied, "My divination and interpretation skills are fairly accurate. Many people have introduced their friends. If I switch locations, wouldn't I lose my clientele? They're all verl d'or!"

"What do you mean by clientele? They're clearly a bunch of fools," Lumian half-jokingly and mockingly remarked.

Osta didn't dare to argue.

Lumian inquired, "I need to discuss something with Mr. K. How can I reach him?"

So he's not here for me… Osta sighed in relief and quickly answered, "Anyone who has attended the gathering can go straight to Psychic's headquarters, located in the building where our gathering took place. At 19 Rue Scheer, knock on Room 103 with three long, two short, and one long beats. Someone will take you to see Mr. K.

“If you don’t want to go in person, you can send a letter. Address it to Room 103, 19 Rue Scheer, Avenue du Boulevard. The recipient is Guillaume Pierre.”

What a fake name… The knocking rhythm differs from the gathering’s… Mr. K never told me this. Did he think Osta would inform me? Lumian nodded, bid Osta farewell, and returned above ground.

At the catacombs’ entrance, he spotted a group of visitors carrying lit white candles, following the administrator through the naturally formed arch and into the Death Empire.

Withdrawing his gaze, Lumian took a public carriage to 19 Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard.

He lowered his cap and knocked on Room 103.

The dark-red wooden door creaked open, revealing a handsome young man with shoulder-length brown hair, resembling an artist.

The lad scrutinized Lumian with his dark brown eyes for a couple of seconds.

“Who are you looking for?”

“I’m Ciel. I need to speak with Mr. K,” Lumian replied bluntly.

The young man cocked his head slightly, as if listening for a faint sound.

Soon, he instructed Lumian, “Follow me.”

The lad led him to a vintage-styled room and unveiled a secret door hidden within the dressing area.

A staircase descended underground, its walls on either side adorned with gas lamps encased in black grids.

Lumian entered the basement and traversed a short corridor before reaching a rather barren chamber.

He suspected other exits were present, some possibly connecting to areas in Underground Trier.

At that moment, Mr. K lounged in a red armchair, his face concealed by the shadow of his large hood.

The gathering’s organizer studied Lumian wordlessly, exuding an unnerving air of intimidation.

Lumian pressed down on his cap and smiled.

“Good morning, Mr. K. I require your assistance.

“The price I’ll have to pay is your call.”

Mr. K remained silent for a few seconds before inquiring in a deep, raspy tone, “Does the Poison Spur Mob know you killed Margot?”

As expected… Lumian wasn’t surprised that Mr. K had information on him.

When he attended the gathering, he deliberately wrapped his face in bandages to recreate his appearance when he killed Margot. He wanted Mr. K to be aware of it and display his worth and impulsive nature.

This could also help “earn” Mr. K’s trust.

Lumian shook his head.

“It’s another problem…”

Lumian recounted his encounter with Charlie and how he had helped him escape his predicament, only to be despised by Susanna Mattise and nearly killed by that peculiar creature. Fortunately, the official Beyonders had arrived in time. He didn’t lie, but he didn’t share too many details either.

This aligned with the information he sought at the gathering.

Mr. K listened intently and asked in a low voice, “You want divine protection?”

Divine protection? Aren’t you overestimating yourself? Just protection! Lumian thought silently and nodded solemnly.

“Yes.”

Mr. K rasped, “That creature is likely a soul-type being, akin to an evil spirit. Normally, it wouldn’t affect you as long as you leave the market district. However, the official Beyonders have clearly taken an interest in this matter. If you move now, you might arouse suspicion. Moreover, if Susanna Mattise remembers or even marks you, you could be attacked anywhere. Many abilities can surpass distance limitations. There’s no need for the creature to truly leave its territory.”

No wonder the two ladies didn’t suggest I leave… Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

“What should I do then?”

Mr. K spoke deliberately, “I can offer some protection, but you need to do something for me.”

“What is it?” Lumian inquired “eagerly.”

Mr. K clasped his hands together and said, “Join any gang in the market district and become a leader.”

So the organization behind Mr. K wants to control the market district indirectly? Lumian agreed without hesitation, “No problem!”

Mr. K nodded slowly and held his left index finger with his right hand.

Then, he yanked the finger off, exposing a bloody wound and ghostly white bones.

Lumian winced at the sight.

Surprisingly, no blood flowed from Mr. K’s wound or finger. Instead, it hovered at the edge, twisting and contracting as it gradually “healed.”

“Take this with you. It can help you in critical moments.” Mr. K tossed the severed finger to Lumian.

The flesh on his fingerless left hand writhed violently, as though a new digit was about to sprout.

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Chapter 145 - 145 Service Fee

145 Service Fee

Lumian deftly extended his right hand, snatching the severed finger from the air.

Feeling its weight and the warmth that hadn't yet dissipated, he was both surprised and disturbed.

He had anticipated Mr. K would offer some form of protection, but he hadn't expected the man to rip off his own finger and toss it to him, claiming it could prove helpful in a tight spot!

Was this some kind of sick joke?

Setting aside the dubious utility of a severed digit, didn't Mr. K worry about the potential consequences of handing over a piece of his own flesh?

In the world of mysticism, one's flesh and blood held significant power. In the wrong hands, they could lead to disastrous consequences.

No one wanted to become the target of a horrifying curse without reason!

Given Mr. K's formidable abilities and his knowledge of mysticism, to the point of being able to act as a Notary, Lumian suspected the man had a way to nullify the various dangers associated with parting with his flesh. That was why he had dared to sever his own finger and hand it over.

Moreover, the detached finger was clearly imbued with magic.

I wonder if I can trade the prospect of meeting the Montsouris ghost with Mr. K by using Fallen Mercury, drawing blood when cutting this finger… As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian was never short of unconventional ideas.

Suppressing the urge, he shifted his gaze from the finger back to Mr. K.

By now, Mr. K had regenerated a new finger, slightly damp and covered in delicate, fair skin.

"Thank you," Lumian murmured, stowing the severed finger in the pocket of his slate-blue workman's uniform.

Mr. K gave a curt nod and said, "You may leave. Don't forget our agreement."

“One more thing.” Lumian produced the diamond necklace. “Could you help me determine if it’s real or fake? I need to exchange it for some cash.”

He already owed Mr. K a favor; he didn’t mind owing a little more.

And if he couldn’t repay the debt? At worst, he’d sell himself to the organization behind Mr. K!

That was Lumian’s endgame.

Mr. K directed the attendant who had led Lumian underground to pass the diamond necklace to him and examined it.

From the corner of his eye, Lumian could see a golden glow emanating from the shadows beneath Mr. K’s hood.

After a few seconds, Mr. K handed the necklace back to the attendant.

“It’s a fake. The craftsmanship is quite impressive, though. It’s worth 50 verl d’or.”

“Alright.” Lumian didn’t bother hiding his disappointment, adding, “I also need a set of identification papers.”

After receiving Mr. K’s affirmation, Lumian left 19 Rue Scheer and caught a public carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. His thoughts bounced between joining a gang without raising suspicion, pondering the purpose of the severed finger, and devising ways to get pawnshops to pay more for the counterfeit diamond necklace—at least 30 verl d’or…

Amid these thoughts, an idea began to crystallize.

Simultaneously, he planned to find a couple of safe houses in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique before noon—the kind that didn’t require identification.

I still have 850 verl d’or and 24 coppet on me. After setting aside the remaining 400 for the information broker Anthony Reid, I’ll have 450 verl d’or left. I can rent two or three safe houses… Lumian carefully calculated his remaining assets.

He pursed his lips, feeling an urgency to leave Mr. K’s severed finger at Auberge du Coq Doré before securing a room.

…

By 3 p.m., Lumian had found rooms in both Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman on Rue des Blouses Blanches, and Quartier du Jardin Botanique on Rue des Pavés —neither of which required identification.

Naturally, there was a surcharge for such discretion. The former was hardly better than Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, costing 6 verl d'or per week. The latter, more akin to Osta Trul's rented apartment, neighbored factory workers from the south and cost 10 verl d'or per week.

Lumian paid four weeks' rent upfront but received no discounts.

Returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, he skimmed through Men's Aesthetics for a while, using cosmetics to soften his sharp features, add shadows, and trim his eyebrows.

Soon, Lumian had completed his initial disguise, transforming into an ordinary-looking man in his mid-twenties with a dangerous air.

After combing his golden-black hair, he donned a dark blue cap, took Mr. K's severed finger, and made his way to Salle de Bal Brise on Avenue du Marché.

Unlike other guests, he didn't enter directly. Instead, he stopped between the khaki building and the white spherical statue made of countless skulls, addressing the two gangsters guarding the entrance, "I need to see Baron Brignais."

Without waiting for their response, he added, "Tell the baron it's Ciel, from our last meeting. He'll be pleased to see me again."

The two gangsters exchanged glances, not daring to delay the baron's business. One of them entered the ballroom.

In under five minutes, the gang member reemerged, telling Lumian, "The baron wants you to meet him where you last saw him."

The café on the second floor? Lumian smirked. With hands in his pockets, he sauntered up the stairs and entered Salle de Bal Brise, spotting Baron Brignais with a mahogany-colored pipe.

The gentleman sported a black, thin tweed suit, a half top hat nearby, and a gleaming ring on his left hand. Four thugs flanked him.

"Sit." Baron Brignais's brown eyes scanned the room, his smile indicating the seat across the table.

Lumian approached and sat, studying Baron Brignais's sharp features and naturally curly brown hair, and said, "Good afternoon. We meet again."

Baron Brignais tapped the pipe's base, smiling as he asked, "What brings you here?"

Lumian produced Charlie's counterfeit diamond necklace, calmly stating,

"I've been strapped for cash and want to pawn this necklace to you. It's worth 1,500 verl d'or. I'll take 1,000."

Baron Brignais turned to a subordinate, commanding, “Get someone to appraise it.”

“Yes, Baron.” A thug with conspicuous bruises on his forehead left the café.

Brignais appraised Lumian again, nodding in approval.

“Not bad. Your makeup skills have come a long way. Although still flawed, you’re no longer as easy to recognize.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Lumian grinned. “Men’s Aesthetics is quite the resource.”

They exchanged small talk until the thug who had left the café returned with a man in his forties, dressed in a formal suit and bow tie, carrying a toolbox.

After assessing the necklace, the man approached Baron Brignais, set the necklace on the table, and whispered, “It’s fake.”

Instantly, all the thugs present drew their revolvers.

Baron Brignais observed Lumian, who appeared unfazed by the appraiser’s declaration or the thugs’ actions.

His grin never wavered as he nodded to the appraiser, “You may leave.”

“Yes, Baron.” The appraiser hurriedly exited the café.

Baron Brignais set down his mahogany pipe, playing with the diamond ring on his left hand. He asked Lumian, still smiling, “Were you aware this necklace was counterfeit?”

Lumian smiled as well.

“Indeed.”

Before he could finish, the thugs aimed their revolvers at him.

Intrigued by Lumian’s composure, Baron Brignais inquired, “Did you anticipate I’d have someone verify the necklace’s authenticity?”

Lumian’s grin remained steady.

“Indeed.”

Baron Brignais’s eyes narrowed.

“Knowing all this, why would you still attempt to borrow 1,000 verl d’or with a fake necklace?

“What makes you think I’d grant your request?”

Lumian slowly rose, disregarding the revolvers aimed at him. He placed his hands on the table's edge, leaned down to meet Baron Brignais's gaze, and smirked.

"Because I killed Margot of the Poison Spur Mob."

Baron Brignais's smile froze.

His pupils involuntarily dilated as if to scrutinize the man before him.

The four thugs, their revolvers aimed at Lumian, also reacted with shock.

As enemies of the Poison Spur Mob, they knew Margot's capabilities all too well.

Lumian's emotionless gaze scanned the thugs' faces, causing them to avert their eyes and, unconsciously, their weapons.

Baron Brignais recovered quickly, addressing the four thugs, "Holster your revolvers! Have I not taught you how to treat guests?"

Reprimanding his subordinates, he turned to Lumian, curiosity piqued, "How did you manage to kill Margot?"

"I stabbed him with something poisonous, but I don't know where he fled before succumbing," Lumian replied nonchalantly.

This aligned with the preliminary intel Baron Brignais had received. Eyes narrowing, he asked with a grin, "Do you understand the implications of taking my 1,000 verl d'or?"

Lumian smirked, unfazed.

"Indeed."

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 504.

Upon seeing Lumian outside the door, Charlie eagerly inquired, "So, is it the real deal?"

"It's a fake. Worth no more than 50 verl d'or," Lumian casually replied as he entered the room.

He noticed that Charlie had already ripped off Susanna Mattise's portrait, leaving behind a sticky residue.

Charlie, having mentally braced himself for the outcome, was disappointed but not crushed. He chuckled self-deprecatingly, "Well, it's still worth 50 verl d'or at least. A generous pawnshop might give me 20 for it."

Lumian shot him a glance and grinned.

“But I managed to sell the fake necklace for 1,000 verl d’or.”

“What?” Charlie was dumbstruck.

Lumian pulled out a thick wad of bills, still smiling.

“The fake necklace is yours and worth 50 verl d’or. That’s all I can offer you. The rest is my fee for services rendered. Is that acceptable?”

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Chapter 146 - 146 Turf

146 Turf

Charlie was dumbstruck and answered subconsciously, “No problem.”

Only when Lumian laid out the 50 verl d’or notes did he snap back to reality. He cautiously peeked out the door.

The evening light was fading, and unlike the second floor, the fifth floor had large balconies on both sides, casting deep shadows. It was as if night had already descended.

Seeing the corridor empty, Charlie breathed a sigh of relief. He lowered his voice and asked Lumian, “You conned someone into buying the fake necklace for 1,000 verl d’or?”

“You’ve got two things wrong.” Lumian grinned and handed the stack of 50 verl d’or notes to Charlie. “First, I didn’t con just any person.”

“Then who?” Charlie questioned, puzzled as he instinctively took the mix of 1 and 5 verl d’or notes.

Lumian’s grin broadened.

“The Savoie Mob.”

Hearing this, Charlie nearly dropped the banknotes in his hand.

He stared at Lumian in terror and blurted, “Are you insane?

“They kill people. Folks go missing all the time on Rue Anarchie!”

Lumian smirked and replied, “Second, it wasn’t a con.”

“What?” Charlie couldn’t follow Lumian’s logic.

Lumian clarified, still smiling, “They knew the necklace was a fake, yet they still forked over 1,000 verl d’or.”

Impossible, Charlie thought, certain it was a joke.

The Savoie Mob might be ruthless, but they weren’t idiots. Why would they pay 1,000 verl d’or for a fake necklace worth only 50 verl d’or?

Then, a wild thought crossed Charlie's mind.

"You didn't steal the leadership from the Savoie Mob, did you?"

That would be even more insane!

Lumian smirked again.

"Relax. Baron Brignais and I reached an agreement through a friendly conversation.

"Don't worry. There won't be any trouble in the future.

"So, do you want the 50 verl d'or or not?"

Considering his own financial situation, he took the 50 verl d'or and muttered,

"Thank you."

Lumian nodded with a smile and turned to go.

In that instant, Charlie grasped the whole picture and blurted out, "Did you join the Savoie Mob?"

Lumian didn't turn around. He waved his hand and replied, "That's right."

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He watched Lumian's silhouette vanish into the darkness outside and disappear down the shadowy staircase.

…

Upon returning to Room 207, Lumian, fresh out of his disguise and ready to hunt for a tasty meal, caught a familiar curse coming from the fourth floor.

"If you think this money is easy, you can lie down and earn it yourself!"

"Useless coward. A dickless wretch; all you dare to do is bully women!"

"Send your mother to me if you dare!"

"…"

Lumian listened for a few seconds and quickly deduced that Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob had come to Ethans with his crew to collect "protection money."

A grin spread across his face.

In the next instant, Lumian donned a dark-blue cap, left Room 207, and made his way to the fourth floor.

Before he could reach Room 408, he heard the sharp crack of a slap followed by Ethans's even more vehement cursing and struggle.

The tenants on this floor shut their wooden doors tight, not daring to step out.

With one hand in his pocket, Lumian arrived outside Room 408. The first thing he noticed was the presence of two goons.

They were clad in dark jackets, blocking the doorway.

At this moment, Ethans's curses blended with sobs and screams.

"You sons of bitches!

"I curse you!

"I'll rip off your dicks!"

Lumian raised an eyebrow and approached the two thugs at the door.

"What do you want?" one of them barked.

Lumian didn't reply. Instead, he took a sudden step forward, reaching out to grab them.

His movements were so swift that he had the two thugs by the back of their heads before they could react.

Lumian applied force, slamming their skulls together.

With a sickening thud, their foreheads bulged, eyes rolled back, and they crumpled to the ground.

As they "cleared the way," Lumian glimpsed the scene inside the room.

Ethans, her flaxen hair and delicate features in disarray, lay on the bed. Her dress was torn, her face visibly bruised and swollen. Wilson, his curly brown hair and deeply creased face sneering, was pocketing a stack of banknotes. His belt unbuckled, another thug was holding Ethans down.

Sensing the disturbance at the door, the Poison Spur Mob leader swiftly reached for his belt and glanced outside.

There he saw Lumian, casually wiping his hands and stepping over his two fallen comrades.

Not giving Wilson a chance to speak, Lumian grinned and said, "Didn't anyone tell you that Auberge du Coq Doré is now under the Savoie Mob's protection…"

Mid-sentence, he lunged forward, throwing a punch before Wilson could fasten his belt.

Wilson hastily dodged and buckled his belt.

Simultaneously, his eyes narrowed as they locked onto Lumian.

Lumian suddenly felt a wave of fear.

It was the unbridled fear of an ordinary person facing a villain or a thug. Wilson had manifested such emotions!

Yet, even as an ordinary person, Lumian wasn't cowed by villains who wouldn't dare to fight back. As a vagrant, he had always believed in fleeing and surrendering if possible. If not, he'd drag the other party down with him. Now, as a Sequence 8 Beyonder, he was even more fearless.

Another Beyonder? Lumian harnessed the intensity of his fear to grapple with Wilson and unleash his close-quarters combat skills.

His hands, elbows, knees, and feet transformed into weapons, overpowering Wilson, who had barely buckled his belt.

As the sounds of their struggle filled the air, another thug sprang into action. He grabbed a chair in the room, poised to smash it into Lumian's back.

But Lumian twisted his upper body like a serpent, circling behind Wilson.

Bang! The chair struck Wilson's head, sending him reeling.

With a crash, the already unstable chair splintered.

Lumian coiled his body like a spring and lifted his right leg.

His heel struck the thug's lower abdomen with pinpoint accuracy, eliciting a muffled groan.

The thug's eyes bulged as he clutched his crotch and crumpled to the floor. He writhed in pain but couldn't make a sound, like a rooster with its neck throttled.

As Lumian's right foot swung back, his arm lashed forward, whipping Wilson's chest.

Unable to dodge, Wilson heard the crack of his ribs breaking.

Before he could recover from the pain, Lumian seized his arms and yanked him closer.

Pfft!

A knee to the chest greeted him.

Wilson's face paled, and his body doubled over.

Lumian clenched his fists and hammered Wilson's back.

Plop! Wilson collapsed to the ground.

Lumian capitalized on the opportunity, pouncing on him. He pinned Wilson's arms behind his back and pressed his knees into his spine.

"I thought you were quite the tough guy," Lumian taunted. "Turns out, you couldn't even last ten seconds."

Based on his assessment, Wilson was only at Sequence 9, a Sequence that focused more on combat and physical enhancement. However, he wasn't sure which pathway he belonged to.

Wilson, provoked and enraged, struggled with all his might but couldn't break free from Lumian's grip.

Lumian glanced up at the dumbstruck Ethans and chuckled at Wilson and the incapacitated thugs.

"Go back and tell your bosses that this is Ciel's turf. If you've got any business, feel free to look for our Savoie Mob!"

"You're a dead man!" Wilson snarled.

Lumian smirked, retorting, "I'm not sure if I'll die, but you're the one dying now."

"You dare to kill me in front of so many witnesses?" Wilson mocked.

Lumian said nothing. He tightened his grip, and a sickening crack echoed in the room.

Wilson let out a spine-chilling scream, beads of cold sweat the size of beans breaking out on his forehead.

His arm was broken!

Lumian hoisted him up and leaped onto Ethans's wooden table. He pushed open the window and dangled Wilson over the outer wall.

Glancing down at the deserted alley, Lumian smiled at Wilson and taunted, "Try guessing. Do you think I dare to throw you down?"

Wilson stared at the cobblestones more than ten meters below and recalled how resolute the other party had been when he said he'd break his arm. For a moment, he didn't dare answer.

Just then, Lumian released his grip.

I haven't answered yet! Wilson's body plunged downward in sheer terror.

With no other option, he desperately tried to adjust his posture to protect his vitals.

Crash!

He hit the ground with a sickening thud, his flesh instantly mangled in multiple places.

Lumian observed for a couple of seconds before chuckling.

"Quite a tough one. You're still alive. Is your nickname Rue Anarchie Cockroach?"

Ignoring Wilson, he jumped off the wooden table and addressed the three thugs struggling to their feet, "Did you hear what I just said?"

The three thugs nodded fearfully and turned to flee.

"Wait," Lumian called out to them.

The three thugs froze on the spot, their bodies trembling slightly.

Lumian gestured at the shattered chair and grinned.

"Aren't you going to compensate for the damage?"

The three thugs hastily pulled out all the banknotes they had and tossed them on the floor.

With Lumian's nod of approval, they stumbled out of Room 408.

Ethans stared blankly the entire time, only recalling the words that this place had been taken over by the Savoie Mob.

Then, she realized that Ciel from the Savoie Mob hadn't informed her about how much she should pay or how often she should pay in the future. He didn't even glance at her as he walked straight to the door.

Ethans instinctively opened her mouth, wanting to ask something, but she hesitated, fearing the Poison Spur Mob might retaliate. She watched Lumian's figure vanish into the darkness beyond the door.

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Chapter 147 - 147 Reaction

147 Reaction

Lumian had just returned to the second floor when he spotted Charlie lingering outside his door.

“Hey, don’t tell me you had another dream? You make me nervous, just popping up at my door like that,” Lumian teased with a hint of mockery.

He couldn’t shake the fact that Charlie had sought him out rather than heading directly to the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.

Charlie glanced at the stairs and lowered his voice.

“Something happened on the fourth floor?”

“You’ve got good ears,” Lumian commended. “There was an incident. I tossed Wilson down the block.”

“Huh?” Charlie appeared bewildered once more.

It took him a moment to process.

“Which Wilson? The one from the Poison Spur Mob who collects money from Miss Ethans?”

“Yes.” Lumian nodded candidly.

At first, Charlie’s expression read, “I see.” Then, he blurted out in shock, “You threw him down the block? From which floor?”

“Fourth floor,” Lumian replied, grinning.

Charlie’s mouth fell open, forgetting to close it.

“You’re not joking, are you?” he asked nervously after a few seconds.

Lumian gestured toward the room across the hall.

“If you don’t believe me, take a look at the alley behind. That guy’s like a cockroach; he didn’t die from the fall.”

“…” Charlie assessed Lumian anew, as though seeing him for the first time. He realized that his mischievous, audacious, and clever friend possessed a side he

didn’t grasp at all.

In Lumian’s eyes, there seemed to be no law, and a chilling coldness ran deep within him. Fear was absent from his mind, and he had genuinely thrown a living person from the fourth floor. Moreover, he was a leader of the Poison Spur Mob!

Wasn’t he afraid of dying?

Wasn’t he afraid of the Poison Spur Mob’s retaliation?

This brought to mind how Ciel had held a dirk to his throat when Susanna Mattise threatened him.

Of course, his weapon wouldn’t have been some Cursed Blade.

The next second, Charlie glanced around and lowered his voice again.

“A-are you out of your mind? The Poison Spur Mob isn’t to be trifled with!

“Why don’t you move away? You should be safe once you leave the market district.”

He felt that no matter how reckless Ciel was or how little he respected the law, he was someone who had genuinely helped him. He had to warn him of the danger so he could escape swiftly.

Lumian smirked and shot back, “Our Savoie Mob isn’t to be trifled with either.”

“Uh…” Charlie suddenly sensed that the situation might not be as he’d imagined.

Lumian opened the door to Room 207 and declared as he entered,

“From now on, Auberge du Coq Doré is our Savoie Mob’s turf. I’ll throw out anyone from the Poison Spur Mob who shows up.”

Had the Savoie Mob enlisted Ciel to handle Wilson? Charlie came to a realization and felt a mixture of relief.

Since the Savoie Mob had instigated the confrontation, they surely had a plan to counter the Poison Spur Mob’s retaliation. A broke, jobless guy like him needn’t worry.

Lumian snapped the suitcase shut, concealing a few sets of clothes and Aurore’s grimoire within. He slid it under the bed and draped a blanket over it. Straightening up, he instructed Charlie,

“If anyone comes looking for me, tell them I went to the Salle de Bal Brise.”

“A-alright.” Charlie watched as Lumian vanished down the stairs, a sudden realization hitting him.

What would become of Miss Ethans after this?

Would she be claimed by the Savoie Mob, or was there still a chance for her to redeem herself?

…

Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian perched at the bar counter, tapping his fingers on the surface.

“One glass of Lover, a serving of mashed potatoes, veal slices in lard, a pork sausage, and a croissant.”

Lover referred to a sugar alcohol brewed from sugarcane syrup, served with ice and water. It was common slang in Intis bars.

Soon enough, Lumian sipped the amber-hued, sweet alcohol and savored the aromatic veal slices.

As he relished the delicacies and listened to the music from the dance floor, his body swayed rhythmically.

Just then, one of Baron Brignais’ gang members sidled up beside him.

Lumian turned to the man, noticing the blood clots on his forehead. He smiled and said, “This is our third encounter, right? What should I call you?”

The thug replied cautiously, “Just call me Louis.”

Another Louis… Lumian mused.

In the Intis Republic, Louis was as common a name as Pierre and Guillaume. The last Louis Lumian had met had given birth to a child, despite being a man.

Louis watched Lumian take a bite of the croissant and offered casually, as if trying to build rapport, “This one’s on me. It’s your first time at our Salle de Bal Brise.”

“Alright.” Lumian didn’t bother with pretenses.

Louis ordered a syrupy lemon soda alcohol dubbed Demon and took a sip.

“You live at Auberge du Coq Doré, right?”

“Yeah.” Lumian grabbed a piece of sausage and popped it into his mouth.

Louis pondered for a moment before asking, “That’s Poison Spur Mob territory. Want to move to Rue des Blouses Blanches?”

“No need.” Lumian sipped his ice-cold Lover, its caramel scent wafting through the air, and grinned. “It’s now our Savoie Mob’s turf.”

“What?” Louis nearly choked on his drink.

Lumian swiveled his head and smirked.

“I tossed Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob off the fourth floor. Auberge du Coq Doré is now Savoie Mob turf.”

Hearing Lumian’s account, Louis’s face gradually stiffened.

After a few seconds, he forced a smile and stood up.

“I need to report this to the baron.”

Why is this guy even more brutal and unhinged than the baron?

“Alright.” Lumian didn’t care.

Louis took a few brisk steps before turning back, leaning in to whisper, “Is Wilson dead?”

“No.” Lumian feigned regret.

What are you regretting? Louis studied Lumian’s face, suddenly wondering: Did we gain a weapon or a massive problem?

…

Avenue du Marché, Unit 126, inside Roger’s three-story building with a modest garden.

As the injured Wilson was carried past him, Roger’s icy blue eyes scanned the three trembling thugs and he demanded, “Who did this?”

“Someone from the Savoie Mob!” A thug answered hastily, slightly hunched. “He calls himself Ciel and says that the Auberge du Coq Doré now belongs to the Savoie Mob!”

Ciel… Black Scorpion Roger’s somewhat plump face registered a mix of confusion and wariness.

He murmured to himself, “There’s no Ciel among the top brass of the Savoie Mob… How did he manage to thrash Wilson like this?”

It was worth noting that Wilson was a Villain, equivalent to a Sequence 9 Beyonder—a master of combat!

At that moment, another thug spoke up speculatively, “Boss, I remember something. We went to Auberge du Coq Doré the night Margot was killed.”

Roger’s expression darkened, a fierce hatred seeping in.

“Was that also Ciel’s doing? How did he pull it off?

“Did the Savoie Mob secretly recruit such a formidable figure to drive us out of the market district?”

A man standing beside Black Scorpion Roger spat hatefully, “First, an assassination; now, an open taunt. If we don’t retaliate, who knows what’ll come next!”

The man had a shaved head but boasted striking features. His lake-blue eyes, high nose bridge, thick brown eyebrows, and curved lips rendered him handsome despite his baldness.

Dressed in a black shirt, dark breeches, and strapless leather boots, he forewent a coat and stood nearly 1.8 meters tall.

Roger pondered for a few seconds before instructing the man beside him,

“Haman, go to Baron Brignais and find out what’s going on. Ask if the Savoie Mob intends to wage an all-out war against our Poison Spur Mob.”

“If they’re open to reconciliation, we can make appropriate concessions.

“Remember, learn to endure—the time isn’t right yet.”

…

On the balcony of a third-floor room in Salle de Bal Brise.

Baron Brignais leisurely puffed on his peach-colored pipe, observing the guests entering and exiting the dance hall.

Suddenly, he turned his gaze towards the door.

Two seconds later, Louis pushed open the door, entering the balcony and stepping past the other thugs.

“Your footsteps are a bit heavy and hurried. Something happen?” Baron Brignais inquired with a smile.

Louis replied anxiously, “Baron, Ciel threw Wilson off the fourth floor of the Auberge du Coq Doré!”

“Wilson from the Poison Spur Mob?” Baron Brignais recalled, seeking confirmation.

“Yes, he’s severely injured but not dead,” Louis quickly added.

Baron Brignais held his pipe, pondering for a moment before asking, “Did Ciel mention why he did that?”

“He said that the Auberge du Coq Doré is now our Savoie Mob’s turf,” Louis repeated Lumian’s words.

Baron Brignais couldn’t help but chuckle.

Taking a drag from his pipe, he spoke with a hint of meaning, “If you don’t handle a sharp weapon properly, it’s easy to hurt yourself. I’ll have to find an opportunity to give him some ‘guidance.’

“What should we do about the Poison Spur Mob? Should we inform the Boss?” Louis asked, concerned.

Baron Brignais considered for a moment and responded, “Not for now.

“Ciel actually performed well this time. I’m curious to see how the Poison Spur Mob reacts.”

Noticing his subordinate’s puzzled expression, Baron Brignais—always fond of ‘educating’ them to showcase his intelligence—smiled and explained, “Since the Poison Spur Mob’s inception, their number of Beyonders has swelled, nearly matching ours in just under two years. They’ve seized a significant amount of territory. Don’t you see a major issue here?

“Give them another two years, and we might be completely driven out of the market district.

“If they want to escalate this matter, I’m more than willing. It’s a prime opportunity for the authorities to take notice and uncover who’s backing them.”

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Chapter 148 - 148 “Lord of the Motel”

148 “Lord of the Motel”

At 10 p.m., while returning to Auberge du Coq Doré from Avenue du Marché, Louis, who was with Baron Brignais earlier, guided Lumian from the main road bathed in yellow light to a side street swallowed by darkness.

Surveying the neglected, broken street lamps, he remarked nonchalantly, “The baron has cut a deal with the Poison Spur Mob. From now on, Auberge du Coq Doré is officially under our Savoie Mob’s control.”

Lumian snorted. “Is the Poison Spur Mob that easy to negotiate with?”

What do you mean? Are you hoping for the two parties to fight? Louis increasingly sensed that Ciel was a dangerous man who thrived on conflict.

!!

He was convinced that Ciel’s nature and approach would bring trouble to the Savoie Mob time and time again in the future.

The market district, already strained by the Poison Spur Mob’s rapid ascent, would certainly become more chaotic.

As a seasoned gang member, Louis believed in bullying ordinary people rather than resorting to violence and bloodshed. Life was precious; he’d witnessed several comrades die in gang wars and police raids. Initially, their families were taken care of, but as time passed, their circumstances deteriorated.

But if cornered, Louis wouldn’t shy away from brutality. Every thug under Baron Brignais had climbed the ranks through street brawls and alley fights. They may not be brainy, but their skills and courage were nothing to sneer at.

Louis slowly exhaled.

“You showed enough force to protect Auberge du Coq Doré, and the Poison Spur Mob didn’t want to escalate matters and draw police attention. So, after the baron covered Wilson’s medical expenses, the matter was settled.

“Keep a low profile for now. If you catch the police’s eye, you won’t withstand a thorough investigation.”

It doesn’t matter to me. I’ll just find a hideout before the official Beyonders corner me. The Poison Spur Mob can run, but they can’t hide… Lumian murmured,

borrowing a line from Aurore's book.

Louis continued, "The baron wants me to tell you that since you're staying at Auberge du Coq Doré, it's your turf now.

"And for members who control their own turf, we don't usually provide daily allowances."

What he implied was that the Savoie Mob likely wouldn't give Lumian any more money beyond the initial 1,000 verl d'or. He'd have to find a way to generate income from his turf.

Lumian was momentarily stunned before replying with a chuckle, "Alright."

As they spoke, they stopped outside Auberge du Coq Doré.

Lumian gazed at the old, cream-colored building and was struck by a bizarre, ludicrous thought.

This is my turf?

The residents of this ramshackle place are all destitute. How can they afford to pay protection fees?

Forget it. It's already a blessing that they don't create trouble for me like Charlie. I can't squeeze money out of them!

Having already consumed two drinks, he skipped the basement bar and retreated to Room 207.

No one had visited.

After perusing Aurore's grimoire for a while, Lumian recognized a familiar footfall, followed by a knock on the door.

He opened it, unsurprised to find Charlie standing there.

Charlie's face was flushed from drinking. He grinned and exclaimed, "Can you believe it? I'm about to land a new job! I went to Rue des Blouses Blanches tonight and bought the waiters drinks. They introduced me to a hotel manager who said they needed a few full-time attendants!"

"If that manager learns you hooked up with a female guest at your previous hotel and were recently implicated in a murder case, will he still consider you?" Lumian retorted.

Charlie's smile froze. He massaged his face and replied, "He might still give me a chance. But Ciel, that's not why I'm here. I wanted to ask what you plan to do with Miss Ethans?"

"What do you mean?" Lumian inquired, smirking.

Charlie forced a smile and asked,"Will you stop her from leaving Rue Anarchie? If you make her keep working the streets, how much should she pay you each time? And how often?"

Lumian chortled.

"She's free to do whatever she wants. It's none of my business. I have plenty of ways to make money."

"I knew it! Praise the Sun and Saint Vièvе!" Charlie cheered. "I could tell from the moment I saw you at the bar that you were a clever and capable gentleman!"

"Trusting the judgment of the Idiot Instrument?" Lumian jested.

Charlie sheepishly smiled.

"That's one factor."

He waved his hand.

"I'll share this news with Miss Ethans!" After taking a few steps, Charlie halted and spun around, asking unusually cautiously, "Will the Poison Spur Mob come back?"

"Baron Brignais has brokered a deal with them. Auberge du Coq Doré is now Savoie Mob's turf," Lumian answered nonchalantly. "And I'm the one in charge here."

Charlie was ecstatic. He spread his arms wide and exclaimed, "Praise the Sun, praise Saint Vièvе, and praise you, Ciel!"

With that, he dashed into the stairwell.

Comparing me to the Eternal Blazing Sun and Saint Vièvе… Are you trying to get me killed faster? Lumian snorted and shook his head. He then retreated to his room and resumed studying Aurore's grimoire.

Outside Room 408, Charlie knocked on the wooden door.

Ethans, her cheek red and swollen, opened the door and stated flatly, "I'm not feeling well today. Find someone else."

Charlie couldn't contain the exciting news.

"Guess what? The motel's no longer under Poison Spur Mob's control. It belongs to the Savoie Mob!"

Ethans suddenly remembered the evening's events and hesitated before asking, "Are you sure?"

“Absolutely!” Charlie replied, his signature enthusiasm returning. “You won’t believe it. I found out from the leader of the Savoie Mob. Ciel, who lives in 207. He’s already become a leader of the Savoie Mob. Auberge du Coq Doré is his turf now! He personally told me that the Poison Spur Mob bastards have scrammed and won’t be back! He also said that the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob reached an agreement!”

Ciel… The man who threw Wilson down? Ethans’s eyes darted, seemingly awakening from her puppet-like state.

“The Poison Spur Mob was really driven away?”

“It’s true!” Charlie nodded emphatically.

Ethans stood stunned for a moment, then clenched her teeth and spat out, “Those sons of bitches, rotten scum, they’re finally gone!”

Charlie continued, “I’ve asked Ciel. He said you can do whatever you want. It’s not his concern. He’s incredibly resourceful. So much so that he can change my opinion of pranksters like him. Can you believe it? He comes up with lucrative schemes every minute!”

Ethans was dumbstruck.

As far as she knew, none of the gangsters were good people. They were all despicable scoundrels who deserved hell!

Charlie kept talking, but Ethans tuned him out. The words “do whatever you want” resonated in her mind.

After Charlie left, she retreated to her room and quickly changed into a lady’s blouse and light-colored pants.

Next, she lifted the mattress and retrieved a stack of 200 verl d’or notes.

She crammed all the bills into her pocket, then hesitated for a moment before removing more than half and hiding it back in its original spot.

With the remaining 40 verl d’or, she shut the door and headed downstairs.

Before long, she stepped out of Auberge du Coq Doré and onto Rue Anarchie.

A solitary gas lamp illuminated the street from a distance. Bathed in crimson moonlight, numerous inebriated people stumbled along the road, shouting, singing, or sporadically clashing with one another.

Ethans sidestepped the drunks and nervously followed the shadows along the street, aiming for Rue Anarchie’s exit.

Throughout her journey, memories of escaping and being apprehended by the Poison Spur Mob on the street haunted her.

The memory of the beating made her shudder involuntarily.

Ethans slowed down, as though the Poison Spur Mob lurked around the corner.

Finally, she reached the exit of Rue Anarchie and saw the broad main road beyond.

Ethans stared at the once-unreachable scene, feeling as if she were in a dream.

Subconsciously, she quickened her pace, striding faster through the dark night under the crimson moonlight.

In no time, she arrived at the nearest public carriage stop.

She still remembered disembarking from the public carriage here on her first day in Trier.

Now, she had finally returned.

With no public carriages running late at night, Ethans didn't mind. She gazed at the street ahead, the postbox shrouded in darkness, and the sign displaying the carriage route. Her eyes welled up with tears.

Suddenly, Ethans spun around and bolted.

She had to get back to Auberge du Coq Doré, pack her belongings, and leave at daybreak!

Ethans sprinted faster, feeling the wind slap her face, cold and damp.

Her vision blurred, and she seemed to see a ghost of her past self.

The former Ethans, who arrived in Trier filled with dreams and enthusiasm, stood beneath the streetlamp, gently beckoning.

Hurry up and catch up!

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Ethans dabbed the corners of her eyes and rapped on the door.

Lumian swung the wooden door open and cast a cursory glance at her.

"What can I do for you?"

In a raspy voice, Ethans inquired, “Why are you helping me?”

Lumian sneered. “Why should I help you? What do you possess that’s worthy of my assistance? You’re not beautiful, and you don’t have much money.”

Ethans’s words of gratitude were immediately choked off.

She couldn’t even recall how she left the second floor. As she packed her belongings, the whole experience felt surreal.

Watching her vanish down the stairs, Lumian snickered.

I’m not helping you. I just can’t stand fate’s cruel taunts.

We are all victims of fate’s ridicule, but I want to defy and resist it, even if I’m not capable enough, until death puts an end to it all!

In that moment, Lumian sensed his Provoker potion digesting a bit further.

Although he was far from fully digesting it and needed time to work through it, this indicated that he had adapted to the Provoker potion, and his condition had stabilized. He could contemplate extracting the sealed power within him and obtaining the Alms Monk’s boon.

Judging by the name, it should compensate for his lack of mystical techniques.

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Chapter 149 - 149 Five Ritualistic Spells

149 Five Ritualistic Spells

Lumian wasn't eager to perform the ritual just yet. For one, he had been swamped all day and was far from his peak condition. He needed rest, or at least to wait until he reset at six in the morning. Secondly, the ritual involved two hidden entities and a corruption that had trapped a village in a time loop. If something went awry, it wasn't just the Auberge du Coq Doré that could be in jeopardy—the entire Rue Anarchie might face destruction. Who knew how many lives would be lost?

Thus, Lumian planned to head underground after daybreak, seeking a secluded quarry cave to serve as the ritual site.

As for the materials, he had already brought them from Cordu.

Rue Anarchie's nights were seldom peaceful, but Lumian managed to sleep well, practically dreamless. He awoke early to the sound of cathedral bells.

Rising slowly, he washed up and headed to a café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. His breakfast consisted of plum pie, savarin, and a café au lait with plenty of milk.

Delicacies always lifted one's spirits, and the Auberge du Coq Doré was no longer under the Poison Spur Mob's thumb. Lumian gradually adjusted to his optimal state.

With renewed purpose, he returned to Room 207, intending to gather the necessary materials and carbide lamp for his venture into Underground Trier.

Just as Lumian finished preparing and was about to leave, he heard a soft knock on the door.

Confused, he opened it to find Anthony Reid standing outside, clad in military-green attire and strapless leather boots.

The forty-something information broker stroked his short blond hair and said to Lumian, "I got something."

The padre or Madame Pualis and her underlings? Lumian stepped aside, allowing Anthony Reid to enter the room.

Anthony scanned the surroundings, Lumian's reflection caught in his dark brown eyes.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt an all-too-familiar unease.

Suppressing his thoughts, he inquired, "What are they?"

Anthony Reid gave a slight nod before replying, "Someone spotted a man suspected to be Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché, the one you believe to be Madame Pualis' butler."

On Avenue du Marché? Lumian's excitement surged.

Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, and I are so close?

"Are you sure?" he asked urgently.

Anthony Reid shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I'm just here to let you know that I haven't forgotten your task. When I'm certain it's really Louis Lund, I'll collect the balance from you."

"My money can't wait to part with me." Lumian made no effort to conceal his eagerness.

After seeing Anthony Reid off, his resolve to obtain the Alms Monk's boon only intensified.

…

A chilly wind whispered through the tunnels, leaving faint traces of moisture on the stone walls above.

Navigating the subterranean streets and alleys, Lumian discovered a passage that led even deeper.

Utilizing a Hunter's innate ability to memorize environments, he descended until he finally reached a quarry hollow, roughly the size of two or three Auberge du Coq Dorés.

Sparse white mushrooms grew in the rock crevices.

Charlie had mentioned that many people in Rue Anarchie and the surrounding areas scoured these underground quarries for mushrooms to bolster their income and meals. Trier mushrooms had become synonymous with these fungi, but the specimens here were clearly natural.

Lumian circled the cave twice, inspecting it thoroughly.

Satisfied that there were no issues, he found a half-meter-tall stone and placed the blood-infused musk candle on it. The other candle was positioned closer to him.

Having tidied the area, Lumian lit the two grayish-white candles in the order of top to bottom—divine before mortal—by channeling his spirituality.

Next, he drew the ritual silver dagger and swiftly sanctified it, erecting a barrier of spirituality.

Unlike the last time he had prayed for the Dancer's power, Lumian's spirituality remained plentiful after completing these tasks. He effortlessly entered a somewhat ethereal state, enabling him to perform rituals without the aid of incense.

He exhaled slowly, picked up the gray amber perfume on the altar, and dripped it into the deity-representing candle.

As the scent sizzled, a sweet, elegant fragrance filled the air, calming his nerves.

After the gray amber perfume came tulip powder. As a strange aroma permeated the spiritual barrier, Lumian took two steps back, gazed at the flickering candle flame, and bellowed in ancient Hermes,

"Power of Inevitability!"

A howling gust swept through the chamber, causing the deity-representing candle's orange flame to quiver. It hung by a thread, threatening to go out at any moment.

In the dimming light, Lumian's left chest seared with pain, accompanied by a wave of dizziness.

Once again, he heard the enigmatic sound that seemed to originate from an infinite distance, yet felt close at hand. However, it wasn't loud enough to engulf him in agony.

Lumian continued chanting the subsequent incantations in ancient Hermes.

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

Within the spiritual barrier, an invisible wind turned pitch black as a faint gray fog filled the space.

Rocks and bottles warped and twisted, appearing as malleable objects.

Silently, the deity-representing candle's flame swelled to the size of a fist, shimmering silver-white with a hint of black.

Granules emerged on Lumian's skin and on the rocks, writhing and stretching, poised to burst forth at any moment.

The terrifying sound filled his ears, drowning out all else. His head spun, threatening to make him vomit.

His thoughts wavered between disarray and chaos as he barely finished reciting the incantation.

As Lumian spoke the final words, the silver-black candle flame contracted into a beam of light that struck his left chest.

Silver-black phantasmal liquid flowed out, enveloping Lumian's body as though it possessed its own life and will.

Lumian had already steeled himself for the onslaught. In his uncontrollable frustration, he felt a prickling pain erupting all over his body. As the piercing ravings seemed to saw through his skull, a burning sensation flared within him.

He collapsed, curling up and enduring the agony with gritted teeth.

All he could do was struggle to maintain the "boat" of rationality amidst the tempestuous waves of pain.

Throughout the ordeal, he was tempted several times to surrender to the malevolent thoughts gnawing at his heart. He longed to merge with the pain, to escape the torture. However, the lingering elegant and sweet fragrance in his nostrils caused his ruthlessness and frustration to ebb and flow repeatedly.

Ultimately, Lumian felt as if his body and mind ceased to exist, leaving only a sense of rational spirituality.

As the pain and ravings began to subside, he realized he had endured.

Lumian lay motionless on the cold ground, not willing to move for an extended period.

After what felt like an eternity, he mustered enough strength to hastily end the ritual and clean up the altar, warding off any potential mishaps.

Having dealt with these matters, Lumian sat on the stone that had served as the altar and scrutinized the changes within himself.

Soon, he muttered, My tolerance for extreme environments has increased a bit… Heh, guess I won't need to buy winter and summer clothes anymore?

Beyond this, Lumian discovered another newfound intuition.

An intuition for luck!

He could roughly sense the recent fortunes of others—good luck, bad luck, potential for disaster, romantic opportunities, and so on—but he couldn't discern the precise details.

In other words, Lumian could detect that someone was experiencing bad luck, but had no way of knowing how unlucky they would be or how long their misfortune would last.

"Truly worthy of a monk with the power of inevitability," Lumian couldn't help but sigh, feeling he could entirely replace Osta Trul as a diviner for others.

Although ignorant about divination, wouldn't he be able to fabricate the corresponding words when he could glimpse the rough strokes of someone's fortune?

Moreover, Lumian acquired an abundance of sacrificial knowledge and five ritualistic spells in his mind.

The former compensated for his many shortcomings in the realm of mysticism, while the latter augmented his repertoire of mystical techniques.

The five ritualistic spells were Animal Creation Spell, Prophecy Spell, Luck Enhancement Spell, Substitution Spell, and Exorcism Spell.

Through ritualistic magic, the Animal Creation Spell utilized sheepskin, cowhide, and other animal hides to morph the target on the altar into the corresponding creature. This could also be applied to Lumian himself. As long as he mastered the incantation to break the curse or waited for the ritual to end, he could revert to human form. While transformed into an animal, he would be unable to speak or wield most of his Beyonder powers.

The Prophecy Spell was entirely different from what Lumian had envisioned. The process involved gathering ingredients such as a snake's venom sac and a rock from an eagle's nest. Using ritualistic magic, one could concoct an unusual concoction. Next, one had to find a corpse dead for less than seven days and not yet cremated or purified. Pouring the concoction into the corpse's mouth would momentarily revive it, allowing the caster to ask three questions about the future.

The Luck Enhancement Spell employed ritualistic magic to create an object linked to one's misfortune. By sending the object away and having others open, consume, step on, or wear it, the caster could transfer their bad luck onto them, thus enhancing their own luck.

The Substitution Spell was even more intricate, and Lumian suspected it was a lower-tier reflection of a Fate Appropriator's abilities. For example, if he wished to evade Susanna Mattise, he would need to find a vagrant and make them live as Ciel for a while. During this period, the vagrant would have to stay in Room 207, use all of Lumian's money, and gain recognition from Charlie and other acquaintances to establish sufficient mystical connections before performing the ritual to complete the substitution.

Upon the ritual's completion, Susanna Mattise would seek vengeance on the vagrant rather than Lumian.

Of course, Lumian wasn't certain he could deceive Susanna Mattise, who was on the verge of becoming a demigod, with a Sequence 8 Substitution Spell. He even doubted whether the ritualistic magic would succeed at all.

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Chapter 150 - 150 Voice

150 Voice

When Lumian first gained the mysticism knowledge, he had placed high hopes on the Exorcism Spell. It appeared to be the perfect solution to deal with Susanna Mattise—provided she hadn't been entirely wiped out by the official Beyonders.

But it was only upon truly grasping the Exorcism Spell did Lumian come to the sobering realization that his jubilation had been premature.

The ritualistic spell was capable of banishing wraiths and even evil spirits, preventing them from tormenting a soul. But it came with two caveats. First, he needed to know the specter's real name and possess a personal item she'd held dear in life. Second, he needed ample time to conduct the ritual.

That second condition meant the Exorcism Spell was a no-go in the heat of battle. It was better suited for situations like Charlie's, haunted by constant dreams of Susanna Mattise, plagued by wraiths or evil spirits, but not on the brink of death.

Lumian, however, hadn't been physically hurt by Susanna Mattise, just targeted. The Exorcism Spell needed a victim, and without one, he couldn't banish her.

When Susanna Mattise made her next move, Lumian knew she wouldn't be playing nice. She'd leech his energy through erotic dreams, leading him slowly but surely towards his demise. Given her prior displays of venom and paranoia, she was sure to strike directly, unleashing her supernatural arsenal to kill on contact.

In such a scenario, Lumian wouldn't have a chance to wield the Exorcism Spell unless someone could buy him a few minutes.

Should I turn to the official Beyonders for help? But that would expose me to the authorities, causing a world of trouble down the line…

Or perhaps Charlie could play the martyr, soothing Susanna Mattise with heartfelt words of love, buying time in the flesh? The longer he held out, the better Lumian's odds of completing the Exorcism Spell… Heh heh, a bizarre thought that's like underground literature, Lumian mused quietly.

Though the current mantra of the Intis Republic was 'freedom,' it was a far cry from true liberty.

On the one hand, they wanted to quash the nostalgia of Roselle's followers and the Carbonari's revolutionary impulses. Opposition threatened the ruling party's authority. On the other hand, they faced the traditionalist Church of the God of

Steam and Machinery and the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. The Intis Republic's censorship of publications was heavy-handed.

They'd even plant spies or groom authors as double agents to keep an eye on influential content creators, ensuring they didn't tarnish the ruling party's image or produce content deemed too explicit or blasphemous for the wider readership.

But with every prohibition came violations. Trier spawned a thriving underground literary scene that reached beyond its borders.

Aurore once, driven by curiosity, bought a few such books. She forbade her brother from reading them and tucked them away in the bookcase's darkest corner. But prohibition bred violation. Lumian had snuck a peek at one and was taken aback.

The book was a critique of the clergy's indulgence and corruption, peppered with erotic content. It was titled 'Monks Chasing Dogs.'

Lumian's plan to use Charlie as bait for Susanna Mattise had a certain subversive literature charm to it.

Then again, I don't have any of Susanna Mattise's personal items to use as a conduit. I could try to hunt down something in the coming days. Regardless of whether it ends up being useful, it's better to be prepared than caught unawares… Lumian shook off his reverie, considering the potential of the other four ritualistic spells and their relevance to him.

To Lumian, the Animal Creation Spell seemed mystical, malevolent, uncanny, and downright horrifying.

If utilized right, it could work wonders. Imagine turning captives into sheep, cows, horses, and just walking away with them. Or infiltrating places no human could, in the form of a critter. But in the thick of a fight, this ritualistic spell was pretty much a dud.

According to the mysticism wisdom bestowed upon Lumian, the invocation for the Animal Creation Spell could be made to the hidden existence known as Inevitability, a host of honorific names unknown to him, or even himself.

Naturally, the prerequisite was ample spirituality and the corresponding rank. Also, the ritual's success rate and the spell's longevity were significantly lower than the previous methods.

The minimum requirement for the Animal Creation Spell was a Sequence 7 Contractee. The higher the rank, the better the chances of the spell working, and the more potent the effect.

With the corruption sealed within him, Lumian wasn't concerned about his rank. He was unsure, though, if his spirituality reserves could endure the consumption of the Animal Creation Spell. If they could, how many times could he bear it?

This led Lumian to speculate that these five ritualistic spells could be simplified at higher ranks and deployed in real combat. For instance, he could simply drape an enemy in sheepskin, chant the preordained incantation, and transform them into sheep.

That doesn't seem plausible for a Contractee, equivalent to a Sequence 7. A Sequence 4 Circle Inhabitant is too lofty for such a rudimentary spell… Could a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator accommodate such a simplification, or is it a Sequence 6, the name of which escapes me? Lumian mused subconsciously.

As for the Luck Enhancement Spell, he felt it could only "assist" others at present, not himself. His destiny was deeply entwined with the corruption sealed within him and the great existence behind the seal. Unless he prayed directly to the power of Inevitability, altering his luck was a non-starter. Only when he ascended to the Fate Appropriator rank could he choose a fate unbound by those lofty beings.

The Substitution Spell was just too convoluted, and it would severely disrupt Lumian's routine and other tasks. He wouldn't consider it unless he was out of options.

Compared to that, the Prophecy Spell seemed like a piece of cake and rather handy as ritualistic magic went.

Lumian had already decided to gather the necessary intel and find a suitable corpse. By inquiring about Charlie's future, he could estimate when Susanna Mattise would strike next and locate Madame Pualis and the others by delving into Louis Lund's destiny.

Dog's drool, lynx innards, hyena tongue, stag bone marrow, sea or aquatic monster flesh, lizard eye, rock from an eagle's nest, snake venom gland, and deadly herbs. These ingredients aren't all that hard to come by. The only pain is the sea or aquatic monster flesh, but the ritual doesn't specify a rank. Technically, the feeblest aquatic monster still counts as an aquatic monster; it just impacts the effect, right? Lumian ruminated for a bit, noticing that his energy levels had considerably rebounded. He readied himself to leave the subterranean quarry cave and head back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Just as he rose to his feet, a sudden furrow creased his brow.

A faint sound reached his ears.

The voice echoed inside his ears!

Lumian fought to steady his nerves, straining to discern the sound.

With each passing moment, the voice grew clearer, more potent, more imposing.

"Lumian Lee!

"Lumian Lee!

“…”

It knows my name? Instinctively, Lumian swept the area with his carbide lamp, yet found no figure, nothing out of the ordinary.

“Lumian Lee!

“Lumian Lee!

“…”

The voice reverberated as if it were emanating from the very core of his being, muffled by his flesh, organs, and bones, creating overlapping echoes.

Inside my body… The thought struck Lumian the moment he made this realization.

In a hushed whisper, he asked, “Who are you?”

The deep, majestic, and spectral voice ceased its chant and solemnly declared, “I’m the Angel of the Lord, Termiboros.”

“Lord? Which lord?” Lumian’s eyes narrowed, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smirk.

He suspected the entity communicating was the corruption entombed within him. After receiving the Alms Monk’s blessing and nearing the entity of Inevitability, it had managed to transmit a voice devoid of corruption via their intertwined powers.

The spectral voice echoing in Lumian’s ears intoned reverently, “The Lord is the ruler of the Great Old Ones, the Essence Above the Sequences, the mighty Circle of Inevitability…”

Merely contemplating these words sent an inexplicable shiver down Lumian’s spine. It felt as if a gaze had pierced the cosmos, the clouds, the surface-level Trier, layers of earth, and was fixed upon him.

Suddenly, Lumian found himself glancing over his shoulder, as if unseen entities were scrutinizing him from the enveloping darkness.

The sensation sent chills down his spine, sowing unease in his mind, threatening to unhinge him.

Out of nowhere, a faint gray fog materialized and shrouded the surroundings, significantly pacifying Lumian’s agitated mind.

He sneered at the self-proclaimed Angel, Termiboros.

“So, you’re the one sealed within me?”

I wonder if it's a bona fide Angel with Beyonder characteristics or just an Angel-tier servant boasting only a boon…

This insolence seemed to digest Lumian's potion further along its course.

Undeterred by Lumian's provocation, Termiboros continued solemnly, "Follow my instructions, break my seal, and I will aid you in resurrecting Aurore Lee.

"You should be well aware that my Lord's power spans the past, the present, and the future. It can weave a cycle of destiny.

"In due time, I will restore Aurore Lee's soul fragment to its state prior to the descent ritual. All you need to do is prepare a body with the essence of life for her."

Lumian fell silent. After a moment, he asked in a low voice, "Descent ritual… Is that the ritual to forge a body for your descent?"

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Chapter 151 - 151 Temptation

151 Temptation

Termiboros' thunderous voice resonated in Lumian's mind.

"Yes."

A snort of laughter broke free from Lumian.

His words oozed sarcasm as he retorted, "So, Aurore and the entire village were snuffed out just so you could set foot on this soil?

"Why the hell should I help you shatter your shackles? If you morphed into an Angel with a boon, I could've swiped your abilities over and over with the ritual I just performed, under the watchful eyes of the mighty existence. Until, of course, I too bask in the angelic status of the Inevitability pathway. Then, I could breathe life back into Aurore and restore everyone to the pre-Cordu destruction era. How pathetic would you look then?

!!

"If you hold the right Beyonder characteristic, I can bide my time until I ascend as an Angel of the Hunter pathway, seizing power on par with your Inevitability skills. Once my army is vast enough, I'll free you, crush you, subjugate you, and make you resurrect Aurore. Hell, I might be able to pull it off myself. I'll subject you to an eternity of torment till the end of time.

"I never had the hots for the Inevitability pathway's boon, but now that I know the ritual was meant for your descent, I'm salivating at the thought of siphoning off all your might and pride."

The more Lumian rambled, the higher his adrenaline spiked. His Provoker potion seemed to digest a notch.

Termiboros' voice was eerily steady, unfazed by Lumian's rant.

"I've encountered my fair share of Beyonders in the cosmos, and I've seen legions of races graced by the Lord's touch. Most of them can't cross the threshold into divinity because that one extra step would obliterate their physical and mental existence.

"The quest for godhood is rife with peril. Are you so sure you can truly evolve into an Angel?

“You should be aware that we’re not talking about slim odds here. Saying it’s a one-in-a-million or one-in-ten-million chance doesn’t even begin to capture the enormous task of ascending to the Angel level.

“If you perish on the Beyonder path, Aurore Lee will follow suit. The seal binding you will naturally dissolve, freeing me from my predicament.”

Lumian threw his head back and laughed.

His laughter bounced off the quarry’s cavernous walls, heightening the eerie quiet and heaviness underground.

“So, why aren’t you sitting tight, waiting for me to kick the bucket?” Lumian picked up the carbide lamp and strode out of the quarry cave. A cryptic smile played on his lips. “I don’t give a damn what you’re plotting or what your endgame is. I couldn’t care less whether you’re a saint or a sinner. All I know is that Aurore and everyone in Cordu Village are dead because of you.”

He paused for a beat, his face contorted into a maniacal grin.

“Someone’s gotta pay the piper for this. Guillaume Bénet, you, and even your so-called lord!”

Termiboros fell silent. The booming voice that had filled Lumian’s mind, heart, bloodstream, bone marrow, and cavities disappeared entirely.

Phew… Lumian heaved a sigh, clutching the carbide lamp as he navigated the pitch-black underground.

Despite the conversation’s brevity, it had drained him.

In Lumian’s previous world-view, corruption was merely that—corruption. At its extreme, it was comparable to power granted by an evil god. The concept of an Angel being shackled within him was beyond his wildest dreams!

Amidst the wreckage of Cordu Village, atop the crimson-hued mountain, stood the body of a three-headed, six-armed behemoth—a vessel designed for an incoming Angel. It was a mystery how much it deviated from a bona fide Angel, but it already filled Lumian with a sense of invincibility.

Had he not remembered their vile deeds, he might have been swayed to give it a shot.

From where he stood, pledging allegiance to the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery seemed no different than submitting to the hidden existence known as Inevitability. At worst, he’d lose himself.

Regaining his composure, Lumian’s senses suddenly tingled. He darted into a side alcove, using loose gravel to snuff out the carbide lamp.

Moments later, the hurried footfalls of three people echoed from the adjacent tunnel, soon swallowed by the inky darkness.

Underground Trier is a hive of activity too… Lumian bided his time for a couple of minutes before digging out the carbide lamp and rejoining the upward path.

The interruption allowed him to collect his thoughts and consider a conundrum.

Given that the corruption inside him was a living entity, the Angel of the Inevitability domain, Termiboros, why had his plea for a boon been successful?

Termiboros wasn't just raw power lacking consciousness, responding automatically to the "correct" ritual. He could deny granting the boon.

Could it be that His imprisonment is so severe that He can't even choose to resist the ritual? The thought made Lumian realize why Termiboros was so desperate to flee.

According to Madam Magician, with every boon He granted, Termiboros would weaken marginally, and the corresponding corruption would dwindle.

Simultaneously, the seal imposed by the great existence wouldn't slacken. As Termiboros's power faded, He would be shackled to the brink of extinction. Eventually, even His consciousness might be expunged.

Lumian steadied himself and began to replay Termiboros's utterances.

Great Old Ones, Above the Sequences, he'd said Great Old Ones and Above the Sequences…

Lumian's head pounded, as if something was attempting to burrow out of his skull, the instant he dredged up these topics.

He stopped his recollection abruptly and murmured to himself, a residual sense of dread lingering, Merely possessing certain knowledge can inflict serious harm? Had I not been safeguarded by the seal of the great existence, would I be dead or afflicted with abnormalities?

I was contemplating exploiting Termiboros's desperation to escape, to bleed Him dry by compelling Him to respond to the ritual magic, thereby boosting the likelihood of success and the eventual impact. But it seems the Angel has plenty of tricks up His sleeve to screw me over, even in His imprisoned state…

I need to tread carefully. Before I really tap into Termiboros, I must have Madam Magician verify my plan for any flaws.

On this front, Lumian doubted that the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Hela, would offer any viable advice. Only Madam Magician, who could effortlessly slip in and out of the time loop and easily tackle the colossus atop the crimson mountain, was worthy of his trust.

Lost in a whirlwind of thoughts, Lumian, lamp in hand, navigated his way back to the level marked by a street name, leveraging his honed Hunter's intuition and recollection.

He attempted to shout in a hushed tone, "Termiboros…"

No answer came.

Lumian intended to inquire whether the Angel, imprisoned within him, was aware of the events in Cordu. After a thoughtful examination, he concluded that Termiboros likely remained in the dark.

Termiboros had only materialized in Cordu at the ritual's culmination before being shackled. He was oblivious to the intricate details.

Phew… Lumian let out a sigh, surveying his present condition.

His Provoker potion had undergone further digestion. It was akin to encapsulating a fresh principle of action.

Could inciting a superior entity expedite the digestion of the Provoker potion? Ah yes, this is a high-ranking entity within the Inevitability domain. In a way, it's a tip of fate. It aligns somewhat with the principles I've deduced… Lumian mused with a chuckle.

Were it not for Termiboros's silence, he would have stirred Him up thrice daily, like clockwork meals!

Pondering over this, Lumian felt that goading an Angel to digest this morsel of a potion wasn't a worthy trade-off.

He hypothesized two reasons. First, Termiboros was sealed and presented a relatively low threat. Second, Termiboros hadn't genuinely been incited.

Shaking his head, Lumian curbed his thoughts, shelving matters whose solutions eluded him.

He retraced his steps to the subterranean Rue Anarchie and climbed the stone steps towards the surface.

Having snuffed out the carbide lamp and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian instantly noticed Charlie perched on the steps outside.

Charlie puffed on a cigarette, gazing at the grayish-white sky with a somber countenance.

"What's up?" Lumian settled down next to Charlie.

Charlie heaved a sigh. "Miss Ethans has moved out."

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Lumian queried, his smile unwavering.

Charlie stammered, pausing for a few seconds before admitting, “Yes, it indeed is. Too many folks around here know her and her deeds. Sigh…”

Lumian clicked his tongue and rose, approaching the Whiskey Sour vendor and presenting 5 coppets worth of copper coins.

“Half a liter of Apple Whiskey Sour.”

The vendor responded with a grin, “Got it.”

He ended up pouring Lumian more than the requested volume of liquor.

Lumian’s eyebrows quirked, but he refrained from questioning. He ambled back to Charlie, took a seat, and nonchalantly remarked, “Seems like the Whiskey Sour guy recognizes me?”

Charlie chuckled.

“He might be aware you’re with the Savoie Gang. No, the Savoie Mob.”

Lumian sipped his Whiskey Sour, inquiring, “How’d he find out?”

Charlie cleared his throat.

“After breaking the news to Miss Ethans last night, I hit the underground bar for a drink and mentioned your induction into the Savoie Mob and your takeover of Auberge du Coq Doré.”

A vivid image flashed in Lumian’s mind:

Charlie, beer in hand, clambering onto a small round table, flailing his stubby arms.

“Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears! You wouldn’t believe the bombshell that dropped at the motel today! Ciel, our Room 207 resident, is now calling the shots for the Savoie Mob and has sent the Poison Spur Mob packing!”

With a drawn-out sigh, Lumian turned to Charlie and quipped, “You’re just worried the police won’t come knocking at my door, aren’t you?”

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Chapter 152 - 152 “Entrustment”

152 “Entrustment”

Charlie’s bones shook as Lumian’s words settled in his ears.

“S-so you’re saying, you don’t want word getting around about you joining the Savoie Mob?”

Charlie had seen the leaders of the Savoie Mob, Poison Spur Mob, and the rest; their names carried weight in the market district of Rue Anarchie. Yet, as notorious as they were, the law never seemed to touch them.

Lumian took a slow pull of his Whiskey Sour, his grin returning.

“That’s fine. Just think twice before you speak, that’s all.”

Even though Lumian had infiltrated the Savoie Mob, he was far from claiming the title of a leader. He hadn’t been privy to the mob’s deepest secrets, didn’t have a crew of thugs at his disposal, and all he had to show for it was the rundown dump they called Auberge du Coq Dor.

So Lumian had his sights set on a fast-track to infamy, eager to climb the mob’s ladder and fulfill Mr. K’s mission.

A mission that involved gaining the trust and favor of Mr. K, and eventually finding a place in the organization behind himall to complete the task given by Madam Magician.

There is something off about the whole thing Lumian thought, his left hand stroking his chin.

Charlie, standing by his side, asked hesitantly, “What exactly should I keep quiet about?”

He had his hunches, but he didn’t want to risk annoying the lawless Lumian by not covering all bases.

Lumian’s smile didn’t falter as he turned to Charlie.

“Avoid discussing anything tied to Susanna Mattise. That includes any mention of threats I made to her, or that time I posed as a lawyer to get into the police station to talk to you.”

He had meant to warn Charlie about this, but hadn’t found the right moment.

“Got it.” Charlie visibly relaxed. “You know, I was thinking about telling the guys at the bar about the time we chased Wilson out of that motel”

Charlie’s number one hobby was regaling the crowd with his exploits.

But Lumian’s eyes turned stormy at his words.

His gut was telling him Charlie was about to walk into some minor trouble, but it wouldn’t be anything life-threatening.

In theory, it has nothing to do with Susanna Mattise. If it did, it wouldn’t be just trouble, it would be a disaster I suppose I can stop worrying about Susanna Mattise for a while, but how long is a while? Lumian mulled over the sense of bad luck.

He’d come to realize that unless someone was extremely unlucky or lucky, or if danger was about to strike, he needed to concentrate to perceive a person’s general luck through his intuition.

It was unlike a Hunter’s danger sense. It wasn’t always activated passively.

Charlie’s voice began to fade as he talked. He turned to Lumian and asked, “Why are you staring at me like that?”

He was half expecting Ciel to jump out with a prank.

Lumian sneered.

“You might want to swing by the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and say a prayer. I have a feeling you’re about to hit a rough patch.”

His tone mirrored that of Osta Trul, the conman.

“What kind of rough patch?” Charlie asked, his voice sharp.

Then it hit him. “How would you know?”

“I have a hunch,” Lumian replied, a smirk playing on his lips.

Of course, it’s a joke Charlie let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m hoping your prediction’s off, then.”

“On the contrary, I couldn’t be more certain.” Lumian’s words were rock solid.

Charlie squinted at him, suspicion etched on his face.

Lumian let out a low chuckle.

“And if I’m wrong, I’ll give you a thrashing. That way, even if something bad does happen, that just proves me more right.”

“” Charlie was speechless.

Is that even allowed?

Regardless, this approach could come in handy for some practical jokes with some slight modification

Lumian was about to rise when he noticed a thin, mangy mutt creeping towards Auberge du Coq Dor from the shadowy street, eyeing the trash he’d tossed from the fruit vendor’s cart.

The mutt moved with care, aware that many of the destitute locals would gladly turn him into dinner.

Just then, Lumian lunged forward, pressing the dog’s neck to the ground.

Caught off guard, the mutt writhed helplessly, baring its teeth in a futile attempt to bite, but its head was immobile.

With his free hand, Lumian pulled out a small vial of tulip powder, emptying its contents into his pocket.

Then, he held the vial to the mutt’s frothing mouth, collecting the saliva as the dog squirmed.

Soon, he had five milliliters. He released his grip and stood up.

The mutt, ready to snap at him, whimpered and scampered off, tail tucked between its legs, when Lumian shot it a menacing glance.

Charlie, who had been standing by, was flabbergasted.

A story he’d once heard came rushing back to him.

The protagonist in the tale would often describe the villain’s cruelty with a line penned by best-selling author Aurore Lee: He would kick any dog that crossed his path!

Lumian downed the rest of his Whiskey Sour and made his way into the motel.

As he passed the front desk, the perpetually grumpy Madame Fels, forced a smile.

“Good morning, CielMonsieur Ciel.”

Lumian gave the plump Madame Fels a sideways glance and asked nonchalantly, “No sign of Monsieur Ive today either?”

Monsieur Ive, the owner of Auberge du Coq Dor, was known far and wide in Rue Anarchie for his penny-pinching ways.

As the new ‘guardian’ of Auberge du Coq Dor, Lumian figured he ought to have a word with Monsieur Ive, just to make sure he didn’t run crying to the cops, afraid the Savoie Mob would shake him down for more cash.

Madame Fels pursed her lips.

“As stingy as he is, only paying for a weekly cleaning crew, he’s a stickler for cleanliness and wouldn’t be caught dead in the motel.”

“Who cleans his house?” Lumian asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“He’s a widower. He and his two kids take care of it.” Madame Fels scoffed.

If she were the one with that kind of money and a motel to boot, she would hire someone to handle such chores. She’d just sit back and enjoy life.

Lumian nodded and chuckled.

Madame Fels replied, a hint of fear in her voice, “I visit him thrice a week to deliver the motel’s earnings and various bills. I’ll let him know you want to see him.”

She mistook Lumian’s words as a veiled threat to Monsieur Ive. If he didn’t meet with the new guardian of Auberge du Coq Dor soon, his survival might be at stake.

Lumian didn’t bother to clarify. He climbed the stairs to his room on the second floor. Under his pillow, he found Mr. K’s finger and tucked it back into his pocket.

After dealing with the tulip powder, he planned to pick up some containers for the ingredients he needed to gather next. But then, a knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

Lumian swung the door open, curiosity piquedhe didn’t recognize the footsteps.

In the doorway stood a man in his forties, clad in a dark jacket, worn-out brown trousers, and a grubby cotton hat. He offered a smile, asking, “Is this Monsieur Ciel?”

“Who else would it be? Madam?” Lumian retorted, his eyes taking in the man’s appearance, expression, and body language.

His brown hair, though slightly greasy, was neatly combed. His dark-brown eyes held a hint of sycophancy, and his lips were creased with lines of practiced smiles. He had an affable air, but there was an unmistakable slickness about him.

“Yes, yes, yes,” the man echoed Lumian’s words.

Lumian's eyebrows twitched.

"And who might you be?"

"I'm Fitz from Room 401. Bankrupt businessman," the man introduced himself with a congenial smile.

Without waiting for Lumian to press further, he spilled his beans.

"I went belly up 'cause of a con that cost me 100,000 verl d'or. I've been traveling between Trier and Suhit for over a decade, saving up. Wanted to settle down, start a family, but then this swindler tricked me out of everything, promising a joint venture.

"If you help me recover that money, I'm willing to part with 30%, no, 50%!"

Lumian didn't invite Fitz into Room 207. Leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, he asked, "Why didn't you go after that money with Margot or Wilson before?"

It wasn't as if they required an upfront payment.

Fitz didn't beat around the bush.

"I did go to Margot. He agreed initially, but then one day, he just said it wasn't possible to recover the money."

Even the Poison Spur Mob couldn't retrieve it? Was the con man bankrupt or backed by someone who made the Poison Spur Mob tread lightly? Lumian, who had been only half-interested till now, leaned in. "Did Margot say why?"

Fitz shook his head. "No, but it's certainly not because Timmons is broke. His dance hall in Quartier de l'Observatoire is printing money!"

Timmons Lumian suspected the con man had either powerful backing or was shielded by a high-ranking figure, which made the Poison Spur Mob wary of pressing him for repayment.

Or maybe, Timmons was a force unto himself.

"So why do you think I can get your money back?" Lumian asked Fitz, a smirk playing on his lips.

Fitz pondered for a moment before laying it all out.

"You're more ruthless than Margot. Plus, even if you decide not to pursue after your investigation, I have nothing to lose.

"Without that money, I can't afford to pay a dime."

“Honest to a fault.” Lumian nodded, appreciating the candor. “I’ll look into it, but don’t get your hopes up.”

If Timmons was simply bluffing and managed to scare off the Poison Spur Mob, the prospect of pocketing an easy 50,000 verl d’or was tempting to anyone.

Fitz, the bankrupt businessman, was playing a long shot. With a nod of assurance from Lumian, he thanked him and made his exit from the second floor.

In that moment, Lumian realized that his spirituality had bounced back considerably. The recovered amount surpassed his original spirituality reserves.

The Alms Monk has boosted my spirituality significantly. At Sequence 8, I can rival the spirituality of other pathways Lumian mused quietly.

Simultaneously, he recalled an uncanny sensation he experienced while sipping the Whiskey Sour.

If he chose to live in poverty, practiced self-restraint, abstained from alcohol, shunned wastefulness, sought alms, and preached, all while adopting the demeanor of an ascetic monk, he would likely experience an enhancement in his intuitive sense of destiny and the likelihood of success of his five ritual spells.

Yet, Lumian had no intention of following that path. He believed it would morph him into a mirror image of the Bestower, gradually merging his identity with His.

Shaking off his introspective thoughts, Lumian left the room, making a beeline for Salle de Bal Brise. His next move was to solicit the Savoie Mob’s help to gather the remaining ingredients and the right containers required for the Prophecy Spell.

He had to seize every opportunity at his disposal!

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Chapter 153 - 153 Strange Rule

153 Strange Rule

Standing before the white globe-shaped statue, an assemblage of countless skulls, in the Salle de Bal Brise,

Lumian paused. His eyes scanned the Intis inscription—"They sleep here, waiting for the arrival of happiness and hope."

Pulling his gaze from the statue, he strode toward the entrance.

Two henchmen, donned in crisp white shirts and dark overcoats, spun on their heels to face him,

"Good morning, Ciel."

They'd been buzzing with the whispers about this brash newcomer who'd reportedly offed Margot and left Wilson licking his wounds, all within a few fleeting days. It was no secret that he'd been roped into the Savoie Mob.

"Good morning, my cabbages," Lumian tossed back, his lips curling into a grin as he borrowed Darième's pet phrase.

The Salle de Bal Brise was still waking up. Waitstaff moved with placid efficiency, arranging chairs, scrubbing the floors.

Lumian had intended to seek out Louis, a familiar face. No need to ruffle the feathers of Baron Brignais over such small matters. But there, nestled at the bar, sat Maxime—the very same one who'd tailed him.

Maxime, still sporting his trademark cap, drank a pint of rye beer.

A smirk spread across Lumian's face as he sauntered over.

Perceiving a presence nearing him, Maxime, out of habit, flicked a sidelong glance.

He went rigid, as though struck by a sudden frost.

In the next heartbeat, he vaulted off his stool and swiveled toward Lumian, plastering on a toadying grin.

"Good morning, Ciel."

He too had caught wind of the rumors—of Ciel's assassination of Margot and the defenestration of Wilson from the fourth floor of Auberge du Coq Doré.

A surge of relief washed over him. Thank the stars he hadn't pushed his luck when he'd been nabbed tailing Ciel. Considering Ciel's penchant for violence, he could've easily ended up as fodder for the rats in some godforsaken corner of Underground Trier.

This man was a bona fide killing machine. No qualms, no hesitation!

Lumian smiled.

"Merely 'Ciel' doesn't quite ring with the proper respect, does it?"

Seeing Maxime blanch, Lumian added,

"I'm curious as to when I'll hear 'Baron Ciel' rolling off your tongue."

This was a jest, yes, but also a thinly veiled indication of his ambition—to rise to the ranks of the Savoie Mob leadership, and sooner rather than later.

His internal dialogue sang a different tune: I'd call you 'Baron' this very moment if it kept you happy, just like our 'Baron' isn't a real baron, but a self-proclaimed one.

Lumian claimed a stool at the bar and patted the one next to him.

"Have a seat. I have a few questions for you."

Maxime swiftly obliged, gesturing to the rye beer before him. "Fancy a pint?"

"Ranger for me, if you please," Lumian responded without missing a beat.

A 'Ranger'—a tangy blend of orange and pomegranate beer—cost two licks more than the rye.

Though it pinched his pocket, Maxime hollered over to the bartender, "A glass of Ranger."

Swiveling back towards Lumian, he flashed a grin.

"What would you like to know?"

Lumian bided his time until the generous pint of the orange-colored beer was delivered before launching his inquiry, "How did you join our Savoie Mob?"

"I'm Savoie born and bred." Maxime gestured to his weather-beaten features. "Hopped over to Trier in search of greener pastures, but my buddy who'd put me up had already joined the Savoie Mob."

The Savoie Mob was the brainchild of a handful of Savoie natives who'd made their living as laborers, servants, and peddlers in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. They were a fierce lot, unafraid to put themselves in harm's way, and they'd quickly carved out their own slice of the pie. As the mob's influence grew, they began to pull in recruits from other provinces and even Trier locals, but the heart of the organization still came from Savoie.

Lumian gave a slight nod, steering the conversation to his next question,

"And is Baron Brignais the head honcho of the whole Savoie Mob?"

"No." Maxime stared at Lumian, aghast.

He'd joined the mob without even grasping the basics?

And he'd taken out Margot and severely injured Wilson in the name of the Savoie Mob!

Lumian took a leisurely sip of his orange-pomegranate beer, a playful grin adorning his face.

"I was under the impression that Baron Brignais was the head honcho. I mean, his swagger, his flair, his brawn… how could he not be the top dog?"

Maxime recoiled in terror, clapping a hand over Lumian's mouth.

Were such words safe to spill in such an open area?

If word got back to that person, it could put a serious kink in his relationship with the baron!

Maxime wasted no time in setting the record straight.

"The baron is in charge of the Salle de Bal Brise, Avenue du Marché, and the loan shark operations. His peers include "Rat" Christo who oversees smuggling, "Giant" Simon who runs the dance joints on Rue du Rossignol, "Red Boots" Franca who oversees Rue des Blouses Blanches, and "Bloody Palm" Black who controls half of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

"There's a top dog above them, but I've never laid eyes on him nor do I know who he is."

In a hushed voice, Maxime added, "Rumor has it he's a legitimate merchant, a card-carrying member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce. And he's no small fry, either."

A member of the Savoie Chamber of Commerce? So, the Chamber of Commerce is backing a mob to handle their dirty laundry and keep the competition in check… Lumian pieced together the puzzle from his own experiences as a drifter, snippets from Aurore's offhand comments, and a smattering of books, magazines,

and newspapers he'd devoured at home.

News of Ciel's arrival at the Salle de Bal Brise reached Louis, Baron Brignais' shadow. He made a beeline for the bar, his heart pounding with worry that the audacious country boy was about to stir the pot yet again!

He was really worried that the bold country boy would cause trouble again!

Finding Lumian engrossed in conversation with Maxime, Louis slid onto a stool on the other side, easing into the chat, "What's got you coming to the Salle de Bal Brise at this hour?"

Lumian shot him a sly smile. "I've got a favor to ask."

Louis, his forehead still sporting a nasty bruise, shrank back at the sight of Lumian's grin.

"What is it?"

Sensing they were about to dive into heavier matters, Maxime beat a hasty retreat from the bar, nursing his rye beer closer to the dance floor.

Lumian retracted his gaze and said slowly, "I need you to fetch me a lizard's eye, a rock from an eagle's nest, and a snake's venom gland."

He kept the full list of the Prophecy Spell's ingredients under wraps, planning to source them from different places.

"What do you need those for?" Louis found the trio of items vile and bizarre.

Lumian chuckled. "Remember how Margot bit the dust?"

Louis felt a chill run down his spine. It felt like a veiled threat, and it was working!

I'm not trying to rattle you… Lumian snickered to himself.

"I stabbed him. My blade was laced with poison."

"Right," Louis remembered Ciel's chat with Baron Brignais.

Seeing Louis still hadn't caught on, Lumian mentally berated, Why is this guy denser than Charlie?

He sighed, spelling it out for him. "Those items are to whip up another batch of poison."

"What are you planning?" Louis nearly jumped out of his skin.

He had a hunch Lumian was about to stir the pot.

“Self-defense,” Lumian replied tersely.

With no grounds to object, Louis let out a sigh of relief, promising,

“I’ll get someone on the job to collect those three items for you.”

He ran through the list of items again, making sure he’d got it straight.

Once he’d confirmed the details, Lumian took a swig of his Ranger, switching gears.

“Ever heard of the Salle de Bal Unique?”

Louis eyed Lumian suspiciously, advising, “Best steer clear of that place. The dance hall’s owner, Timmons, is tight with the police commissioner of Quartier de l’Observatoire. And there’s a shadowy organization pulling his strings. Anyone who’s tried to squeeze them has found themselves in a world of hurt, and some have even vanished off the face of the world.”

Each quartier in Trier had its own police headquarters, each headed by a commissioner.

The police commissioner’s official title was the Commissioner of the Trier Police Affairs Committee, answering to the Minister of the Trier Police Department.

So that’s why the Poison Spur Mob never had the guts to chase up Timmons’ debt… Lumian nodded, deep in thought.

Seeing the worry etched on Louis’s face, afraid he was about to stir up a hornet’s nest, Lumian threw him a curveball.

“Who else in the Poison Spur Mob ranks up there with Margot? And who’s their boss?”

What are you trying to do? Louis almost blurted out.

Could it be that Ciel’s planning to knock off all the heavy hitters in the Poison Spur Mob?

Are you out of your mind?

Keeping his cool, Louis replied, “That’s none of your concern right now.”

Lumian responded with a knowing smile, not pushing the matter. He downed his Ranger.

…

In the shadowy enclave of Quartier de l’Observatoire, nestled near the catacombs,

Lumian found Osta Trul huddled by the bonfire.

He laughed mockingly.

“You’re the most professional person I’ve ever come across.”

Like clockwork, Osta was here seven days a week, peddling his con.

“I’d love to be soaking myself on some beach, but my debts tell a different story.” The thought of hopping a steam locomotive out of Trier and dodging his outstanding loans had crossed Osta’s mind. Yet, each time he made it as far as the station, Baron Brignais’s goons would be there to give him a good thrashing.

This had instilled in him a healthy fear of the Baron’s reach, and he’d since abandoned any such ideas.

“I need you to fetch me a few things,” Lumian cut to the chase, settling down beside Osta. “For each item you bring, there’s an extra 5 verl d’or in it for you.”

Osta’s eyes sparked with interest.

“What are you after?”

Lumian stared into the fire, his voice low. “Lynx innards, hyena tongue, stag bone marrow, and any deadly herb.”

“They’re not easy to come by.” Osta tried to haggle.

He’d already made up his mind to scour the eateries in Quartier de l’Observatoire.

Lumian brushed him off, changing the subject. “Where can I find aquatic monsters in Trier?”

Osta pondered a moment before replying, “There’s an underground river in the catacombs nearby, fed by the Srenzo River. Every so often, someone claims to have run into an aquatic monster. And occasionally, some surface along the Srenzo River banks, but they’re quickly dispatched by the Purifiers or the Machinery Hivemind.”

Lumian nodded. “Do you know the Salle de Bal Unique?”

“Sure do.” Osta pointed skyward. “It’s over on Rue Ancienne, right by Place du Purgatoire.”

“1 verl d’or. Show me the way.” Lumian rose to his feet.

He planned to scope out the place, gather what intel he could. If it was a dead end, he’d move on.

In no time, Osta was leading Lumian topside, veering into Rue Ancienne near the square, and halting in front of a vintage edifice.

The building, a somber shade of blue-gray, retained its pre-Roselle charm.

Classic pediments, a chevron roof, and leaded windows.

The Salle de Bal Unique occupied the ground floor, its entrance resembling a giant maw.

It happened to be past noon, and a carriage pulled up to the curb as three men and a woman alighted.

Dressed in dark short suits, they sauntered towards the Salle de Bal Unique.

As they neared the entrance, each member of the quartet produced a monocle, fitting it over their right eye.

Watching this, Lumian turned to Osta, bemusement written all over his face.

Osta, flashing a knowing smile, enlightened him, “That’s one of Salle de Bal Unique’s rules. Everyone who steps inside must be donning a short suit and a monocle.”

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Chapter 154 - 154 Mini-Theater

154 Mini-Theater

Taking in Osta's revelation, Lumian couldn't help a chuckle, thinking, What kind of strange rule is this?

His mind flicked back to the turtle-walking, the space bridge, clutching a candle while touring the catacombs, and sprinting just to keep up with the latest fad. He felt that this seemed inconsequential, but perhaps not for the folks of Trier, who seemed to relish something unique.

As the stream of monocle-clad patrons flowed in, Lumian queried with a casual air, "What happens if a newcomer isn't privy to the rule?"

Osta gestured to the far end of Rue Ancienne.

"There's a place selling monocles and short suits there.

"I'd wager the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique is behind it."

No doubt about it… Lumian murmured under his breath.

He wouldn't put it past Timmons to concoct such a rule for the Salle de Bal Unique to cash in on the monocle and short suit trade.

Undeniably, it was also a nod to the citizens of Trier's relentless pursuit of the latest trends and fashion.

"How long has this joint been in business?" Lumian nonchalantly gestured toward the Salle de Bal Unique across the street.

"Over two decades. It's been here since I first landed in Trier. Rumor has it, it opened when dance halls became the rage." Osta stole a glance toward Place du Purgatoire. "Anything else? I need to get back underground."

His mind was on making money, wary of missing out on potential clients seeking his divination and "assistance."

Lumian swung his gaze onto him.

Osta's heart stuttered, feeling as though he were in the crosshairs of a formidable predator.

"What's the matter?" He subconsciously forced a smile again.

Lumian withdrew his gaze, nonchalantly advising, “Stay sharp for the next couple of days.”

“What?” Osta found himself flustered, bewildered, and somewhat frightened.

Ciel isn’t threatening me, is he? We just had a smooth collaboration. He even tasked me with finding some materials!

A grin played at the corners of Lumian’s mouth.

“Exactly as I said, but it’s got nothing to do with me.

“Also, do me a favor and dig up more details on the aquatic monster. The more comprehensive, the better. Same pay as before.”

Is he implying that I might be getting unlucky and be beaten up? Osta tried to decipher Lumian’s cryptic message.

At the same time, he found something oddly familiar about Lumian’s demeanor and tone but couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

As a Secrets Suppliant, his divination prowess was remarkably superior to the average person.

Suddenly, it struck him why he found the whole exchange eerily familiar.

Wasn’t this the exact manner he addressed his own “customers”?

Across from the antiquated building, Lumian contemplated whether to invest in a short suit and monocle to infiltrate the Salle de Bal Unique and gather intel.

If Timmons is indeed part of some mysterious organization and chummy with the police commissioner, snatching him for a bounty of verl d’or isn’t a smart move. It’d muck up my operation. Wouldn’t the money spent on the short suits and monocles go down the drain? They don’t come cheap, after all. Lumian was never one to hold back on expenses, with Trier teeming with “generous souls,” but he knew when to pinch pennies.

Mulling over his options, he scanned his surroundings, his eyes landing on an “Alone” bar diagonally across the Salle de Bal Unique.

Patrons of a dance hall would likely frequent a bar too. They must be rivals… Suddenly, a light bulb went off in Lumian’s head.

After all, enemies often knew one another best, and those most familiar with a dance hall would likely be its competitors!

Even if their accounts were likely embellished, they could still offer some grains of truth.

Without missing a beat, Lumian swiveled around and sauntered into the Alone bar.

The buildings on Rue Ancienne were steeped in antiquity, with most dating back to pre-Roselle times. Their windows were mere slits, letting in scant daylight. The overarching theme here was one of darkness.

Unperturbed by the unlit gas lamps, Lumian navigated through the dimly lit hall, sparsely populated by patrons, and took a stool at the bar.

Removing his cap, he ordered, “A gin on the rocks.”

The bar counter was tucked away in the darkest corner of the joint. The lean bartender was shrouded in shadows, his features obscured, revealing only a silhouette.

Despite Lumian’s keen eyesight, he could barely discern the man’s curly black hair, slightly blue eyes, and a somewhat low bridge of his nose.

As he awaited his gin, Lumian flashed a casual smile and remarked,

“Business seems slow here. The Salle de Bal Unique across the way appears to be drawing quite the crowd.”

The bartender slid a lemon wedge and iced gin across to Lumian.

Casting a glance at the door, he replied, “We do alright, but most folks are downstairs waiting for the play.

“How about it? Fancy a peek? Patrons with drinks can gain entry to the cellar for five licks. Uh, make it eight for your gin.”

“A play?” Lumian couldn’t hide his astonishment.

This was a facet none of the Rue Anarchie bars could boast.

The bartender sighed, explaining, “They can dance, sing, shoot pool, play cards across the road. We’ve got to stand out somehow to lure in customers.

“Many bars and cafes on the north shore now have their own mini-theaters.”

Lumian was at a loss for words, resorting to a mere sigh. “Has the bar scene gotten so cutthroat?”

He then produced three 20-coppet silver coins etched with gears and a 5-coppet copper coin, handing them to the bartender.

The total amounted to 13 licks or 65 coppets, including the ticket to the mini-theater for the performance.

The bartender promptly pointed to the stairs next to the counter leading down.

“You can head to the cellar anytime. Feel free to take your drink with you.”

No ticket required? Lumian wasn’t in a rush to vacate the counter. He smiled, asking, “The Salle de Bal Unique across the way seems rather… unique?”

“It certainly is.” The bartender lowered his voice. “Did you get swindled over there? Is that why you’re so curious?”

“Exactly.” Lumian nodded without missing a beat.

He saw no reason of hiding it.

The bartender chortled.

“We get scammed hopefuls straggling in here every day, but none ever pull it off. Heck, I once spotted the police commissioner of Quartier de l’Observatoire, Conde, strutting into the dance hall, all decked out in a short suit and a monocle.”

Timmons is no pushover… Lumian quickly abandoned any notion of conning the proprietor of Salle de Bal Unique.

Gin in hand, he pushed away from the counter, making his way down to the cellar.

Before he could reach the timber door, the bartender’s shout echoed, “Patron coming through!”

The door creaked open with a groan.

Lumian slowed his stride, taking in his surroundings as he stepped inside.

It was a makeshift theater, a half-height wooden platform stretching across the far end. Two gas wall lamps cast a feeble light.

Where the illumination fell short, stools and chairs were scattered sparsely.

At that moment, over 20 guests were settled in, engrossed in the show unfolding on the stage.

The silence was deafening, punctuated only by the sporadic clink of glasses, the dimly lit cellar rendered almost eerily hushed.

Lumian claimed a chair near the exit, his eyes drifting to the stage.

The performer was not a person but a puppet half the height of a person.

Adorned in a palette of yellow, white, and red paint, regardless of gender, each puppet bore an overstated grin.

Guided by nearly invisible threads, the puppets moved, opening their mouths, turning, running, carrying out a variety of plays.

From somewhere, a deep male voice and a slightly shrill female voice took turns delivering the lines.

Bathed in the faint, yellowish glow from the gas lamps, against the looming darkness, the painted clown puppets took on a sinister edge.

Lumian was instinctively put off by the ambiance.

Not one to squander the ticket cost, he stuck around a bit longer until the play wrapped up.

Throughout, not a sound was made. The audience, some faces bathed in the yellow light, others shrouded in darkness, were far more engrossed than Lumian had imagined.

Having drained his gin, Lumian took his leave of the mini-theater, where only two gas lamps held off the darkness.

…

As Lumian made his way back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, he claimed a window seat in a public carriage. As the shops and pedestrians retreated in the backdrop, he mulled over his next moves.

First order of business, secure some aquatic monster flesh and collect the necessary components for the Prophecy Spell. Second, elevate my standing in the Savoie Mob, aiming for a leadership position sooner rather than later… What's the plan…

Lost in his thoughts, his eyes snagged on a familiar figure.

There was Wilson of the Poison Spur Mob, clad in a white shirt and black jacket, his craggy face framed by a mop of curly brown hair.

With his two goons in tow, Wilson navigated Avenue du Marché, disappearing down a side alley. He moved with an assured stride, his posture unscathed.

Lumian was taken aback. He's up and about after being thrown down by him?

The fall was from four stories high!

That was some recovery. Made cockroaches look like amateurs!

A theory started to form in Lumian's mind.

The Poison Spur Mob has extraordinary healing powers?

Possibly Planter pathway's Doctor?

As he pondered, a memory surfaced.

In his dream, Madame Pualis had demonstrated the power to heal wounds instantaneously!

Although the dream might have distorted or exaggerated the reality, Madame Pualis's anomalous pathway did encompass a sphere related to life.

And Louis Lund was suspected to show up on Avenue du Marché… Could the force behind the Poison Spur Mob be linked to the evil god worshiped by Madame Pualis? As Lumian ruminated over this, a smirk slowly crept onto his face.

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Chapter 155 - 155 Jenna

155 Jenna

The circumstances of Wilson's rapid recovery were riddled with uncertainty. Lumian toyed with the idea that it was the work of a Sequence 8 "Doctor" from the Planter pathway, or a Sequence 9 "Apothecary" from its namesake pathway. Yet, his heart clung to the hope of unmasking Madame Pualis and her subordinates.

Had he pieced together the puzzle sooner, and had Wilson and his crew not gone far off into the distance, Lumian would have thrown himself from the moving public carriage, hot on their trail. He envisioned wrangling Wilson into some clandestine quarry cave, pressing him for answers about his miraculous recuperation.

If this saga bore no link to the evil god that Madame Pualis revered, Lumian was prepared to swallow his pride and apologize to Wilson, who, in turn, would owe Lumian his life for not permanently silencing him.

But, to snuff him out was also on the table. The ball was in Lumian's court.

As the carriage came to a halt at its station, Lumian was the first to alight, retracing his steps to the alley where Wilson and his crew had disappeared.

No barricades existed here. It was a bustling place, with people constantly coming and going. Wilson and his gang hadn't left any clear trail. Lumian devoted a painstaking quarter of an hour to trying to discern any signs of them, finally admitting defeat.

But he wasn't beaten down. Wilson may have slipped through his fingers, but there were others like Will or Williamson. The Poison Spur Mob was a hydra of sorts, with a plethora of leaders just a notch above Wilson. Each had their own turf, their own dealings. They could run, but they couldn't hide. Lumian just needed patience. Sooner or later, he'd cross paths with one or two of them. And they, undoubtedly, were more intimately involved with the shadowy forces pulling the strings behind the Poison Spur Mob than Wilson. They knew more!

Phew… Exhaling a deep breath, Lumian wrestled his impatience into submission, deciding to lay low and watch for a while before concocting a hunting strategy.

If the Poison Spur Mob truly was entwined with the evil god that Madame Pualis worshiped, then the leaders on par with Margot were either Sequence 8s, endowed with Beyonder characteristics, or they were spawn of an evil god, gifted with boons akin to a Sequence 8 Beyonder. They could even be stronger. If Lumian

didn’t arm himself with enough intel and set an appropriate snare, he was likely to end up on the losing side.

I can’t forget I’m a Hunter, just because I’ve become a Provoker. Chiding himself, Lumian slipped down Avenue du Marché and strolled into the Salle de Bal Brise.

Given it was barely past three in the afternoon, the place was practically deserted. No music played, no one danced. His eyes immediately found Louis, the thug, nursing a glass of pomegranate ale at the bar counter.

“Soda?” Lumian grinned, sauntering over. “How about drinking something an adult would drink?”

Louis swiveled, meeting Ciel’s amiable smile draped over the bar counter.

The sight left him momentarily stunned, as if he couldn’t quite place the young man before him.

Was this the same Ciel who masked his wild ruthlessness behind a constant grin, one who’d resort to violence over the slightest disagreement?

He seemed more like a greenhorn, a na?ve country boy who had just been roped into the Savoie Mob.

Louis gave his soda a wistful swirl, a bitter smile tugging at his lips.

“I’ve got to be at the baron’s side later. Can’t afford to get sloshed.”

Lumian’s eyes flicked to the bruised knot on Louis’ forehead, a chuckle bubbling up. He pointed at his forehead, commenting, “Still nursing that bump? How long’s it been?

“I ran into Wilson earlier. After I broke his arm and tossed him from the fourth floor, you’d think he’d be worse for wear. But he looked perfectly fine.”

Louis was taken aback.

“Seems so, at least on the surface. Wanted to say hello, but he hightailed it out of there too fast.” Lumian’s tone carried a hint of regret.

Say hello? More like you want to rough up Wilson again and not even give the guy a chance to heal, Louis thought, but he didn’t dare voice it.

His face took on a grave cast as he muttered to himself, “When we clashed with the Poison Spur Mob in the past, their wounded always bounced back in just a few days. The baron thinks they’ve got some Beyonders with a knack for healing. But for someone like Wilson to recover so rapidly from such serious injuries… that’s unheard of.”

“Could it be because you guys have never managed to put a serious dent in any of the Poison Spur Mob members?” Lumian’s voice was laced with mockery.

Louis pondered, then conceded, “There have been a few, but not many. Plus, we usually don’t see them again for a good long while. By then, they’re all healed up.”

So, Wilson’s recovery outpaces even Doctor and Apothecary Beyonder powers? Lumian managed to glean a crucial tidbit from Louis’s words.

Although it could point to a higher Sequence Beyonder on the corresponding pathway, it at least narrowed down some possibilities for him.

Just as Lumian was gearing up to probe the progress on gathering concoction ingredients, a stunning figure swept into the room.

A woman, ostentatiously attired, with her chestnut hair tied up, loose tendrils framing her ears, cheeks, and falling down her back.

Her face was dusted with powder, black eyeliner accentuating her blue eyes, lending them a deep, decadent allure.

At present, she was decked out in a bold red dress that left little to the imagination, sequins catching the light at strategic spots.

Isn’t this the chanteuse known for her bawdy songs at the Poison Spur Mob’s Salle de Gristmill? Lumian did a double take.

This was the Savoie Mob’s Salle de Bal Brise!

Still, Lumian couldn’t be entirely sure if it was the same woman. The singer had a mole by her lips, while this woman sported one at the corner of her left eye.

“Catching your eye, is she? That ‘Little Minx’?” Louis followed Lumian’s gaze.

Lumian chuckled. “How about we use a more respectful moniker? Manners matter.”

“You sound just like the baron sometimes,” Louis mused. “Her stage name is ‘Little Minx’, ‘Little Minx’ Jenna. She’s known as a ‘Showy Diva’.”

“And what exactly is a ‘Showy Diva’?” Lumian didn’t attempt to cover up his ignorance. After all, he was a newcomer to Trier, straight out of a backwater like Cordu.

Louis took a moment to recall the baron’s words and then delivered smoothly, “It’s all about her performance style, her acting, her flamboyant outfits. She’s a standout singer.”

She’s a chanteuse too? Lumian probed, “She performs at the Salle de Gristmill as well?”

“Sure does. As long as she’s getting paid, she’ll belt out tunes in any dance hall on Rue Anarchie.” As Louis spoke, “Little Minx” Jenna sauntered over.

Her blue eyes roamed the room, lingering on Lumian before moving to Louis.

“Ten songs, four verl d’or. I’ll keep a third of the tips thrown on stage.”

“Deal.” Louis had the baron’s approval.

Only 4 verl d’or for a night’s performance? Lumian found himself questioning. Had he overpaid Osta Trul?

In unfamiliar territory, he was woefully out of touch with the going rates.

Spotting his lingering gaze, Jenna swiveled her head, flashing him a grin.

“Feel free to let your eyes wander a bit lower.”

She was referencing her scantily clad chest.

For Lumian, whose only exposure to such scenarios was through novels, this was uncharted territory. Yet, his face betrayed no unease. Flashing a smile, he said,

“I was merely wondering. The last time I spotted you, your mole was by your lips. Now it’s nestled by your eye.”

Jenna’s reply came in the form of a captivating smile, which made Louis swallow hard.

“Are you from out of town?” Jenna queried.

Lumian bobbed his head in affirmation.

With a playful grin, Jenna leaned in, a finger tracing her cheek as she softly elucidated,

“It’s all the rage here in Trier. Ladies often sport a faux mole. Right in the middle of the cheek for elegance, smack in the middle of the nose for audacity, at the corners of the eyes for passion, by the lips for allure, and nestled in the décolletage for secrets…”

As she spoke, she sent Lumian a saucy wink, as if to say, “Today, I’m all about passion.”

Ah, Trier… Lumian could only shake his head in amazement.

Given their proximity, the intoxicating blend of Jenna’s natural scent and the heady perfume she wore invaded his senses.

This led Lumian to instinctively rub his nose.

Jenna's reaction was immediate.

"Don't tell me you still have your virginity? I'm not a street girl, but for you, I might make an exception."

She took a moment to appraise Lumian, seemingly pleased with what she saw.

Virginity? Something that magically returns every morning at 6 a.m.? Lumian scoffed inwardly, his smile nonchalant.

"Right now? I'm afraid you might miss your performance tonight."

Back at the Ol' Tavern in Cordu Village, Lumian often had to match the locals in their coarseness, else he'd become the butt of their jokes.

Jenna's response was a hearty laugh and a dismissive wave of her hand.

"I'll find you after my set tonight."

With that, she sauntered off towards the modest wooden stage at the front of the dance floor, keen to get a feel for the place.

Isn't she jumping the gun a bit? Where's the agreement on a time and place? Lumian mused to himself.

She was clearly just yanking his chain!

Louis chimed in, a tinge of envy coloring his voice, "Don't fall for her act. She gets a kick out of toying with good-looking men. She won't actually follow through.

"I reckon she's Franca's sweetheart."

"Franca, 'Red Boots' Franca?" Lumian's surprise was palpable.

"Red Boots" Franca was a key figure in the Savoie Mob, ruling over Rue des Blouses Blanches, and rumored to be a woman.

"Exactly," Louis affirmed. "Franca appears to be the Boss's mistress, but she seems to swing both ways. She and 'Little Minx' are thick as thieves."

A lover's lover… Lumian once again marveled at the peculiarities of Trier.

Louis watched Jenna, now swaying gracefully on the stage, a look of longing etched on his face.

"She wasn't this mesmerizing when she first arrived in the market district. Over the past couple of years, she's become more adept at presentation, more feminine. What a shame…"

“If you manage to climb the ranks and stand toe to toe with Red Boots, you might have a shot,” Lumian teased, stoking Louis’s ambition. He then shifted gears, “Any luck tracking down those three items I needed?”

Louis tore his gaze away from Jenna to respond, “I was just about to tell you, we’ve managed to gather them all.”

“That quick?” Lumian was taken aback by the Savoie Mob’s efficiency.

Why not start a factory? Why stick with the mob life?

Louis elaborated, “‘Rat’ Christo keeps a variety of critters, some rare, some less so. Some we could take off his hands for the right price. That’s how we got the lizard’s eye and the snake’s venom sac. The eagle’s nest rock was a bonus.”

“Rat” Christo, the one in charge of smuggling? Lumian mulled over this newfound information.

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Chapter 156 - 156 Landlord

156 Landlord

Louis carried on, “I’ll arrange for someone to bring those three items to Auberge du Coq Doré later.”

“And the cost?” Lumian was prepared to offer Louis an extra reward for his diligence.

Louis merely shook his head.

“The baron says you needn’t worry about the payment. He believes your strength building equates to our Savoie Mob’s strengthening.”

Even without Baron Brignais spelling it out, Louis deduced his ploy of roping Lumian in. In any case, the cost was under 10 verl d’or.

!!

So according to the baron’s logic, I can have him refund the materials I require to progress to Pyromaniac? Lumian mused with a hint of sarcasm.

Louis was taking a sip from his pomegranate soda when a group sauntered into the Salle de Bal Brise.

The group’s leader was strikingly tall, towering over 1.9 meters. His light-yellow hair, short and plush, clung to his scalp akin to high-grade velvet.

He had a huge nose, light-blue eyes, and a roughly textured face. He was dressed in a figure-hugging black suit, topped off with a wide-brimmed round hat.

Louis’s features tightened, he carefully placed down the soda bottle, turning to Lumian, “I need to attend to the baron.”

Just then, the beefy man in his early thirties walked a crew that had the air of gangsters about them towards the café’s staircase.

“Who’s he?” Lumian questioned, unable to hide his curiosity.

Louis rose, offhandedly answering, “That’s ‘Giant’ Simon, runs the dance halls on Rue du Rossignol.”

“Isn’t he a part of our Savoie Mob as well?” Lumian probed further.

Louis nodded. “True, but he’s not on good terms with the baron. He’s always arguing that the baron, since he oversees the loan-sharking, ought to relinquish control of the Salle de Bal Brise.

“I’m heading up; need to see what he’s here for.”

Louis had barely taken two steps when he noticed Lumian, still planted at the bar counter, from his peripheral vision.

He couldn’t resist an inward sigh.

He just doesn’t grasp how to seize the moment. Shouldn’t he have shown some initiative and backed me up with the baron? If ‘Giant’ Simon dares say anything unsavory, stare him down, threaten him with a gun. Only then will he start to earn the baron’s trust.

Yes, he may be ruthless, mad, and powerful, but he remains a greenhorn when it comes to these things.

Naturally, if Lumian truly wanted to accompany him to the second floor and aid Baron Brignais in maintaining appearances at the café, Louis would turn him down. After all, the baron and “Giant” Simon could potentially be discussing confidential matters concerning the Savoie Mob. It was no place for a rookie to eavesdrop.

Lumian ruminated, The Savoie Mob seems riddled with internal strife…

Suppose there’s a showdown between Baron Brignais and “Giant” Simon and one bites the dust. And then the head honcho needs a strong hand to quell the storm and take over their positions, wouldn’t I be the perfect candidate? When that time comes, as long as I pass muster, I’ll have fulfilled Mr. K’s mission.

Now the trick is to pit Baron Brignais and “Giant” Simon against each other without arousing suspicion…

Lost in his strategic contemplation, Lumian requested a glass of absinthe.

Before he could savor the last of the enigmatic emerald elixir, he spotted “Giant” Simon emerging from the staircase, henchmen in tow, a thunderous expression on his face.

Well, he doesn’t seem pleased… Lumian noted, retracting his gaze.

He wasn’t rushing to translate his thoughts into action; he was still woefully short on the ins and outs of the Savoie Mob.

Later that evening, on his return to Auberge du Coq Doré, Madame Fels, seated at the reception desk, rose and informed him, “Monsieur Ive has arrived. He’s waiting for you in the first-floor dining room, by the window.”

Not bad. He came quite quickly… Lumian nodded approvingly, making his way to the small dining room opposite the lobby.

Monsieur Ive had heard tell of Ciel's eccentric yet stylish hair. On seeing him step into the dining room, he rose, all smiles.

"Monsieur Ciel, right this way."

He was a man on the cusp of his fifties. His blonde hair, streaked with silver, was neatly arranged. He sported a faded dark suit with a pair of chestnut tweed trousers. His eyes were a bright blue, and he bore a thin beard.

Lumian glanced at the cane resting against the dining table, then approached, a congenial smile playing on his lips.

"Good evening, Monsieur Ive."

Once both men were seated, Ive beckoned the waiter to begin serving.

"My apologies for the delay in visiting, I've been swamped recently," Ive expressed remorsefully.

His accent distinctly belonged to the Trier region.

Feigning ignorance, Lumian questioned, "Do you own more than one motel?"

Otherwise, what's kept him so busy?

Ive was taken aback. He hadn't anticipated that Lumian would take his polite remark literally.

He stammered, "There are… some other affairs, but they're neither here nor there."

As their conversation flowed, the waiter brought in the evening meal, a serving each.

Bean soup, pork sausage, Feynapotter rice, and a sauce that occupied a fifth of the plate.

"This is their signature meat sauce," Ive informed, bubbling with enthusiasm.

Is that all? Lumian's perception of the landlord's miserliness took a new dimension.

It didn't overly concern him, though. He dug into the Feynapotter rice, smothered in the mildly meaty sauce, laced with pepper and vinegar.

After consuming his meal for about a minute, Lumian looked up, addressing Monsieur Ive with a wry smile, "With your penny-pinching tendencies, why

provide each room with sulfur?"

He purposely avoided the softer term "frugal," his tone saturated with sarcasm.

Monsieur Ive's face clouded over, evidently displeased.

He kept his emotions in check, forcing a strained smile.

"The motel is riddled with bedbugs. Nobody would stay here without the sulfur we provide."

Really? As long as the price is low enough, those hard up for cash won't fuss about a few bedbugs… Lumian casually sectioned off a piece of sausage, taking a bite.

After mulling it over a bit, he suggested, "Why not employ a couple of regular cleaners for daily cleaning? That could effectively cut down on the bedbugs."

"Two full-time cleaners would set me back 130 to 150 verl d'or a month, while a thorough cleaning once a week only costs 18 verl d'or," Monsieur Ive protested, visibly pained at the prospect.

Lumian simply smiled.

"I meant, why don't you do the cleaning yourself, get your kids to help?"

That would shave off 18 verl d'or from his weekly expenses.

Monsieur Ive appeared to mull over the proposal, seeming to see the merit in it.

However, after a reflective pause, he sighed and said, "Sadly, we're otherwise occupied."

Doing what? Lumian didn't push for an answer.

He had already established that Ive was nothing short of a tightwad.

Monsieur Ive studied Lumian, hesitating before he offered, "I used to hand Margot 20 verl d'or weekly. Which day would you prefer?"

Lumian scoffed.

"No need to hand it over to me. Invest in an additional thorough cleaning each week."

Monsieur Ive was somewhat surprised but raised no objections. After all, the cleaning service cost only 18 verl d'or, and if contracted for twice a week, he could haggle for a better rate.

Having polished off his plate, Lumian queried,

“Do you happen to know what happened to the tenant from 504?”

He was speaking of the man who’d plastered Susanna Mattise’s portrait in Charlie’s room, a frequent face on Rue de la Muraille, Rue de Breda, and Rue du Rossignol, who had since moved on.

Lumian had sought this information from Madame Fels earlier, but she’d offered no insight. As far as she was concerned, her interest in tenants ceased as soon as they paid their rent and didn’t damage anything.

Monsieur Ive appeared taken aback, glancing at the leftovers on his plate before replying,

“I’m not sure who you mean. I don’t often visit the motel. I’m unaware of who’s occupying which rooms.”

That response… Smacks of guilt… Lumian’s eyebrows twitched slightly, but he didn’t push the issue. He watched as Monsieur Ive tidied up his plate, not a morsel of rice or a trace of sauce left behind.

After Monsieur Ive had taken his leave, Lumian emerged from the motel some 20 seconds later, tailing the landlord from a safe distance.

He tracked Monsieur Ive to a beige, six-story apartment block situated in the heart of Avenue du Marché.

From what he’d gathered from Madame Fels’s usual chitchat, this was most likely Monsieur Ive’s residence.

Lumian didn’t rush to make a “house call”. There were certain activities best carried out under the cloak of night. Moreover, he wasn’t entirely sure whether the official Beyonders were still probing into Susanna Mattise’s affairs or hoping to find any leads through Monsieur Ive. An accidental encounter could be rather awkward.

If it came to that, Lumian would have to make himself scarce promptly.

Under the warm glow of the streetlamps, he circled Monsieur Ive’s apartment, taking in his surroundings.

What struck Lumian most was the three-story, brick-red edifice diagonally across from the apartment on the opposite side of Avenue du Marché.

The foyer, propped up by pillars, bore a sign overhead: “Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.”

People streamed in continuously. Every now and then, bursts of applause and strains of music floated out, creating a lively atmosphere.

Lumian knew that this was a theater catering to common folk with its affordable ticket prices, holding a monopoly in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

An ideal spot for evading pursuit… Lumian was reminded of theater-related incidents from various novels. Grinning, he crossed the street and entered the foyer of the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Posters advertising current and upcoming plays, as well as a few past classics, adorned the walls.

As Lumian considered how best to exploit the theater, he stood there, earnestly examining the photographs, sketches, and captions.

Suddenly, a familiar face caught his eye on a poster tucked away in a corner.

Playing an extra in the background, a man with a shock of starkly blond hair, blue eyes, and a wispy beard was featured. It was none other than Monsieur Ive, the man he'd been tailing!

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Chapter 157 - 157 Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

157 Ancienne Cage à Pigeons

Monsieur Ive, a theater actor as well? Or merely an enthusiast? Lumian pondered the enigma.

His immediate impression was, as proprietor and landlord of the Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ive could be classified as affluent. Moreover, he managed several other enterprises, so the notion of him dabbling in acting appeared improbable. Nevertheless, taking into account Ive's proclivity for hoarding wealth and his frugal tendencies, Lumian couldn't completely rule out the possibility of the man dabbling as a minor actor during his idle hours. It was an opportunity, after all, to rake in a few more coins and avoid squandering valuable time.

Once satisfied that the small-time character indeed was Monsieur Ive, Lumian's eyes drifted to the poster's title: Forest Fairy.

From the additional script, Lumian deciphered that this was a classic production from the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, occasionally revived for new runs.

The actress portraying the Forest Fairy boasted distinct facial contours, an ethereal and captivating aura, and lake-blue eyes filled with innocence and sanctity.

However, Lumian found her less than bewitching, given her adornments of bracelet, necklace, and belt fashioned from tree branches and verdant leaves, topped off by a floral laurel crown. She stirred memories of Ava, the Spring Elf from his dreams, and Susanna Mattise with her cascading turquoise tresses.

For Lumian, these were not nostalgic musings. Especially the latter, bereft of the unusual allure her hair had once commanded, now evoked an eerie and revolting image.

Charlotte Calvino. After noting the actress's name, Lumian scrutinized the other posters for more clues.

Ultimately, he deduced that Monsieur Ive had performed in three plays at the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, yet in each, he was but a mere supporting actor, easily replaced.

Entering the theater with a thoughtful demeanor, Lumian forked out ten licks for a ticket.

The Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons was a well-designed edifice. A large stage dominated the far end, illuminated by gas wall lamps, cloaked by lofty curtains and equipped with several steam-powered machines.

Neat rows of seating lined the theater, progressively ascending like terraced staircases.

Lumian took his ticket stub and located his seat.

The ongoing play was "Princess and the Beast". The actors' attire tended towards the liberal, with hints of risqué—entirely in keeping with the aesthetic sensibilities of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Watching the performance unfold, Lumian was struck with an internal gasp of awe.

Could this be Trier's standard for acting?

Such theatrics only earn them keep in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman? What caliber do the theaters in Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra hold?

Lumian wasn't a stranger to the world of theater. Despite Aurore's homebody tendencies, even she occasionally craved the outdoors. Sometimes she borrowed a pony from Madame Pualis, or chatted with Cordu's old ladies, narrated stories to local children, and occasionally she'd even take Lumian to Dariège to attend plays, opera, circus performances or visit the underground book market for creative inspiration.

In comparison to the Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, those theatrical performances seemed akin to amateur efforts.

The lead actors on the stage were simply spellbinding. Whether through their facial expressions, physical gestures, or delivered lines, they were as though plucked from the narrative's pages and set into the world of the living. Lumian, initially focused on scouting for anomalies, found himself unexpectedly engrossed in the unfolding drama. He felt a pang for the Beast's tangled turmoil of self-doubt, brutality, and torment, and for the Princess, her unspoiled innocence, kindness, and heartfelt distress.

Any one of these principal performers could easily steal the spotlight in a Dariège theater.

As the curtain fell, Lumian found himself rising to his feet, clapping his approval, a twinge of disappointment in his heart that the performance had concluded so swiftly.

He detected nothing suspicious with the actors, nor could he discern anything out of the ordinary within the theater itself during his regular sojourns to the restroom during intermissions.

Madame Fels had hinted that Monsieur Ive cultivated a rooftop vegetable garden as a cost-saving measure. Lumian deduced that the Ive residence must, therefore, be on the apartment building's top floor, the sixth to be exact.

After a brief scrutiny, Lumian's gaze landed on the faintest of the glowing windows.

In keeping with Ive's penny-pinching character, he probably refused to light an additional gas lamp.

Finding a secluded, dark corner, Lumian set himself up, his focus locked onto the dimly lit window, a silent sentinel awaiting any sign of activity.

As the hours wore on, a homeless man wandered by, hoping to claim this sheltered nook as his makeshift bed for the night. However, catching sight of Lumian's shadowy figure, he reluctantly shuffled off elsewhere.

Such encounters barely registered with Lumian anymore. Unperturbed, he maintained his vigil.

Close to 11 p.m., the feeble light in the window blinked out.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Monsieur Ive, garbed in a faintly dark suit and chestnut-hued tweed trousers, materialized at the apartment door.

With cautious glances cast about him, clutching a carbide lamp, he made his way along the street's shadowy cloak towards the Underground Trier entrance a stone's throw away.

Lumian bore witness as a living statue, observing the retreating illumination of Monsieur Ive's lamp until it was swallowed by darkness.

Several minutes later, with no signs of official Beyonders tailing Monsieur Ive, Lumian arose, dusted off his attire, and crossed the Avenue du Marché towards the hidden stone staircase leading underground.

Lumian did not attempt to follow him. First and foremost, he had no source of light; his only candles were those used in ritualistic magic, their scent too conspicuous. Second, he lacked knowledge about Monsieur Ive's true capabilities, his motives for venturing into Underground Trier, or the extent of power he might command.

Retracing a few steps, Lumian melted into the shadow of a nearby building's pillar, shrouding himself in the comforting dark.

A tedious wait ensued. As midnight loomed, the blue radiance of the carbide lamp punctuated the darkness at the underground entrance.

The elongated shadow of Monsieur Ive once again graced the scene.

Just as he came to the bottom of the stone staircase, Lumian tugged his cap lower over his eyes and stepped forward, barking out, “This is a hold-up!”

The strategy behind this sudden ploy was to gauge Monsieur Ive’s strength. Should the landlord be a formidable force, Lumian suspected he would merely dismiss the mugger with lethal efficiency. In that case, Lumian would have the opportunity to make a swift exit, his greatest risks being some minor injuries and a dent in his pocket.

If, however, Monsieur Ive failed to exhibit significant ability, the faux robbery would quickly morph into a real kidnapping. Lumian would then corner the landlord in a remote pocket of the Underground Trier, demanding answers about his secretive behavior around Room 504’s tenant and his nocturnal trips to the underground world.

At Lumian’s gruff demand for a ‘hold-up,’ Monsieur Ive visibly flinched.

Seeming to accept his fate, he pulled out a worn brown leather wallet, extracting a single silver coin valued at 1 verl d’or.

An unexpected surge of avarice flooded Lumian at the sight of the silver coin. Its intricate design, with the cherubic relief on the surface and radiating lines, drew him in.

Almost against his will, he found his right hand reaching out to snatch the coin from Monsieur Ive. With a swift pivot, he spun on his heel and took off, playing the part of a robber to perfection.

Five or six steps into his escape, a niggling thought started to bother Lumian.

What sort of robber would flee after pilfering a solitary 1 verl d’or coin?

And why did I even seize the coin?

Lumian’s senses abruptly reignited. Channeling Dancer’s agility, he made a forceful twist of his frame and skidded to a halt.

He noticed Monsieur Ive was also on the run.

The landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré darted across Avenue du Marché and made a beeline for Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Lumian, originally preparing to pursue, abruptly dropped his pace.

Monsieur Ive, now a victim of robbery, didn’t aim for the sanctuary of his home nor the aid of law enforcement in the bustling market district. Instead, he elected for the theater, situated at an angle from his dwelling!

Could it be that he perceived a more effective guard there? Lumian’s brow furrowed in contemplation.

Then, within the span of a heartbeat, he spun around and resumed his faux robber's role.

He was anxious that Monsieur Ive might rally a force capable of reclaiming his pilfered silver coin.

Given Monsieur Ive's infamous miserliness, such a response was within the realm of possibility!

Although Lumian was not particularly concerned about losing a single verl d'or, getting caught would undoubtedly unmask his identity.

Exiting Avenue du Marché, he nonchalantly flipped the silver coin to a destitute vagabond dozing at the street's edge.

At the metallic ring, the man's eyes flickered open, resting on the gleaming piece nestled under the nearby lamplight.

Once back on Rue Anarchie, Lumian peeled off his cap and coat, tucking them under his arm as he resumed his leisurely stride.

His test had confirmed his suspicions: Monsieur Ive was no ordinary man. He possessed Beyonder abilities, albeit seemingly ill-equipped for combat. He had elected to "gift" a silver coin to an apparent burglar and retreat.

This little episode filled me with a sudden, overwhelming desire for that silver coin. A desire so fierce, I nearly abandoned my true intentions, almost succumbing to madness… Lumian reflected on the strange encounter.

It was a sensation he recognized.

He had experienced a similar one when facing Susanna Mattise.

One filled him with paralyzing fear, the other stripped him of rational thought, substituting it with raw hatred.

The similarities of these abilities' manifestations… Could Monsieur Ive be linked to Susanna Mattise? What fate could have befallen Room 504's tenant… The Forest Fairy, the foliage, laurels… Does Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons have ties to Susanna Mattise as well? Lumian speculated as he retraced his steps to Auberge du Coq Doré.

He slipped into the underground bar to find Charlie, glass of beer in hand, belting out a tune with a few of the inn's tenants.

"We impoverished souls, dwelling in the attic…"

Catching sight of Lumian's return, Charlie excused himself and ambled over to the counter, heaving a sigh as he began,

“You wouldn’t believe what transpired this afternoon. The hotel manager nicked my drinks twice, and then had the gall to say that because of Madame Alice’s situation, he couldn’t promote me to an official attendant. I’m stuck as a lowly handyman. How utterly odious. Just how unlucky can I get?”

Suddenly, Charlie fell silent, muttering to himself, “Unlucky, unlucky…”

After repeating it a handful of times, he glanced up at Lumian, a look of surprise registering on his face at the sight of Lumian’s subtle smile.

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Chapter 158 - 158 “Report”

158 “Report”

As he pondered on Ciel’s early morning warning of potential misfortune, Charlie was dumbstruck. The very afternoon he had lost the job prospect he’d been eagerly awaiting and even squandered a few verl d’or hosting a round of drinks. The thought of it all intensified the weight on his shoulders.

Ciel’s smirk hit him, and Charlie’s voice instinctively dropped to a hush.

“You can predict the future?”

His forecast had hit the mark with uncanny precision!

“Didn’t I tell you? Just a wild guess,” Lumian stated, his lie rolling smoothly off his tongue.

Yet, it wasn’t entirely untruthful. It was more an educated guess, based on the luck patterns he’d perceived. It was akin to devising the method after having the final answer.

Charlie’s expression reflected his disbelief, yet he didn’t challenge the claim. Instead, he asked hopefully, “Has my run of bad luck ended?”

Lumian turned, his focus shifting, and his eyes growing stormy.

His face soon mirrored the seriousness of his thoughts.

Charlie, witnessing Ciel’s shift in demeanor, felt his pulse quicken and his mouth go arid with anxiety.

“What, what’s going on?”

Lumian pressed his lips together before stating, “You’re in for a disaster.”

Charlie’s countenance faltered, his complexion turning pale, a stark contrast to its earlier flush.

Lumian chuckled.

“Just pulling your leg. You may not have the best luck for a while, but you won’t be particularly ill-fated either.”

It suggested that even if the issue with Susanna Mattise hadn't been entirely handled, it wouldn't escalate any time soon.

Charlie couldn't quite grasp Lumian's words. "Really?"

"It's a tall tale! Believe it if you wish. No skin off my back if you don't," Lumian remarked, ordering a glass of absinthe fennel with a dismissive smile.

Lumian's nonchalant demeanor helped Charlie breathe easy. He nestled onto the bar stool next to him, sipping his rye beer.

"I had thought the whole situation wasn't quite done yet."

That's not out of the question… Lumian made no effort to unnerve Charlie further.

Charlie's gaze fell on the bar top as he murmured, "You know, in that moment, I wished to be a lowly handyman and leave the market district ASAP."

Lumian glanced his way.

A raw bitterness bared itself on Charlie's face.

Lumian suggested further, "You might as well pay a visit to the nearest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and pray more.

"And by the way, I dined with our landlord, Monsieur Ive, today. He seemed a bit odd when Room 504 came up in our chat, almost as if he knows something about the previous tenant but isn't keen on sharing."

Charlie froze for a moment before comprehending Ciel's reference.

He lowered his voice again. "The one who hung that woman's portrait?"

Lumian confirmed with a slow, assertive nod.

Charlie stayed quiet for a beat before muttering, "Does that woman have any ties to Monsieur Ive? Does he suspect something off about the portrait? I-I should inform the authorities. I'll head to the nearest cathedral at dawn and speak to the priest…"

Not bad. A few days under my wing and you're much sharper than Louis from the Savoie Mob. You caught my hint right away… Lumian raised his glass, taking a sip of the visually appealing green liquid.

Lumian was not well versed in the details of Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hence the severity of the problem was a mystery to him. Any self-led investigation would take at least a couple of weeks to gather any meaningful information. Even then, he might not possess the means to tackle it. As such, his best course of action was to alert the authorities from the get-go, allowing them to take the reins.

Once he'd reached a decision, Charlie shot a covert glance at Pavard Neeson, who was engrossed in the art of mixology. Confirming that he had the man's undivided attention, he leaned in and whispered to Lumian, "If they query the source of my information, what should I say?"

"Just tell them that it cropped up during our chat," Lumian responded candidly.

With Charlie previously singing his praises, the police in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman were aware that Auberge du Coq Doré had fallen under Ciel's jurisdiction. Thus, it was only a matter of time before Ciel and Monsieur Ive, the landlord, crossed paths over a meal and some idle chatter.

When the time came, the official Beyonders could make casual inquiries and ascertain that all was in order. They would have no reason to cast suspicion upon Lumian.

"Alright." Charlie's demeanor noticeably relaxed.

Lumian savored another sip of his La Fée Verte before posing a question, "Which of the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob do you know?"

Charlie had previously alluded to the leaders of the Savoie Mob, the Poison Spur Mob, and several other smaller gangs having a certain notoriety in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman—enough to frighten the youngsters.

"What are you scheming?" Charlie's countenance lit up with excitement.

"I intend to ask them a question or two," Lumian chose to frame it in the most courteous manner possible.

Charlie's enthusiasm dipped a notch, realizing he wouldn't be privy to any spectacle.

"Besides Margot, I know of two others. One's 'Hammer' Ait. He was a regular at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, but he's been frequenting Rue Anarchie of late. Then there's Harman, sans any nickname. I've observed Margot in his company on multiple occasions, showing him considerable deference. He's bald, by the way.

"The head honcho of the Poison Spur Mob is 'Black Scorpion' Roger. He appears to reside somewhere on Avenue du Marché…"

Garnering Margot's respect implies Harman's status and power within the Poison Spur Mob superseded his… Perhaps "Hammer" Ait has taken control of Salle de Gristmill and Rue Anarchie, hence his regular appearances here? Lumian pondered, setting his sights on "Hammer" Ait.

His plan was to shadow the gang leader over the ensuing days, familiarizing himself with his routines and behaviors. Should he fail to locate Wilson in due course, he would contemplate making an example of Ait.

After emptying his glass of absinthe, Lumian and Charlie made their way upstairs.

Upon reaching Room 207, Lumian noticed a wooden crate, adorned with the black-painted emblem of the Savoie Mob—a bullet and a dirk—placed near the entrance.

Could it be the ingredients sent by Louis? Lumian stooped to pick up the crate, subsequently unlocking the door to the room.

As he flipped open the lid, the foul stench of bird droppings wafted up from a dark stone, accompanied a pair of eyeballs, bloodshot and haunting, and a poison sac, securely encased within a glass jar.

…

Avenue du Marché was bathed in a yellowish glow thanks to the gas lamps.

Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, was guiding someone towards a vagrant, slumbering soundly with eyes tightly shut.

“Here lies my silver coin!” he pronounced.

The person behind him threw a skeptical glance towards the sleeping tramp and queried, “Did he rob you?”

“Absolutely not,” Ive replied with firm conviction. “The differences in height, physique, even clothing are too significant.”

“A robber that tosses stolen loot to a tramp… this situation is undeniably peculiar.” The figure, teetering on the edge of the lamp’s glow, nodded in near imperceptibility. “We must remain vigilant, prepared for unforeseen complications or potential investigations.”

Ive simply grunted his agreement, grumbling under his breath, “Had he not cast my silver coin to this vagrant, we could have traced him directly.”

He possessed the unique capability to sense the location of his possessions, but only for a limited time.

…

The following morning found Lumian holed up in Auberge du Coq Doré, engrossed in Aurore’s grimoire.

He needed to keep an eye on “Hammer” Ait and his cohorts, which meant altering his study routine to the morning. These gangsters only made their appearance in the afternoon, and their nightly escapades ended in the early morning hours.

Charlie had left at dawn for the closest Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral. Upon his return, his calm demeanor was underscored by a radiant smile; he seemed to have

found a source of solace and received validation.

As the clock approached noon, Lumian stowed his grimoire and ambled over to Avenue du Marché. He positioned himself a short distance from Monsieur Ive's apartment and the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, hoping to witness any activity from the official Beyonders.

The streets were bustling as usual, the shops brimming with activity, and carriages weaving in and out. Yet, none bore any hints of the recent events.

After observing for some time, Lumian was about to seek out a restaurant to satiate his hunger when he spotted Monsieur Ive in the distance.

Still clad in his faded formal suit and chestnut tweed trousers, donning a gray wide-brimmed hat, and grasping a black cane, he made his way towards his apartment.

The official Beyonders haven't made their move yet? Lumian contemplated briefly before crossing Avenue du Marché to intercept the landlord.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur Ive. Out on an errand?" he greeted, all smiles.

Monsieur Ive looked slightly disoriented before scrutinizing Lumian, a touch of trepidation in his gaze.

"I'd something to attend to at the police station."

So, the official Beyonders roped in Monsieur Ive through the police station, but delegated the interrogation to someone with the required abilities? Lumian surmised the situation, albeit with a lingering query: The officials didn't uncover that Monsieur Ive possessed Beyonder powers?

Lumian responded with a gentle nod and a reassuring smile.

"Is there something I could assist you with?"

"No need," Monsieur Ive responded, his tone veering between guarded and resistant.

He gestured towards the beige apartment.

"I need to get home."

In an effort to not arouse any suspicion, Lumian made no further attempts to detain or probe him.

As Monsieur Ive walked away, Lumian was left behind, a slight furrow marking his brow.

Looking back at their brief exchange, nothing seemed off. Yet, certain details felt out of place, leaving him with a peculiar sensation.

On impulse, Lumian shifted his focus to the retreating figure of Monsieur Ive, attempting to gauge his recent string of luck.

It seemed pretty ordinary; nothing too fortunate or adverse.

Nonetheless, Lumian found his suspicion intensifying rather than alleviating.

During their dinner the previous night, Lumian had instinctively assessed Monsieur Ive's luck.

It had leaned towards the unfortunate end of the spectrum!

And now, in a span of a day, his luck had taken a turn for the better. What could've transpired? Lost in thought, Lumian sauntered down Avenue du Marché, his hands nonchalantly tucked into his pockets.

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Chapter 159 - 159 Savage

159 Savage

The tide of fortune seems to have taken a turn for Monsieur Ive…

His handling of the robbery the previous night must have laid bare his secret, especially in the face of a disguised Beyonder masquerading as a police officer…

Had they sniffed out something amiss and laid a trap in anticipation?

The gears in Lumian's head whirred ever faster, his growing suspicion suggesting that his 'robbery' attempt on Monsieur Ive had alerted the man and his unseen benefactors.

Still, he couldn't verify any peculiarity regarding the landlord without attempting some sleuthing.

Realizing the eyes of the figure at the Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons could be upon him, Lumian abandoned the thought of paying a 'visit' to Monsieur Ive, making a hasty exit from Avenue du Marché.

An urgency overwhelmed him to execute the Prophecy Spell in order to unravel some of the mysteries plaguing him.

…

Within the confines of Quartier de l'Observatoire, near the subterranean cemetery, warmed by a flickering bonfire, Lumian spotted Osta Trul's peculiar stance. "Did you manage to procure the items I asked for?"

Osta responded with a genuine grin, "Indeed. The entrails of a lynx, tongue of a hyena, marrow of a stag, and some gray henbane. It all amounts to 5 verl d'or. Including the reward you pledged, it comes to 20 verl d'or."

Per their agreement, Lumian was to hand him an extra 5 verl d'or for each item. But, noticing the sum worth of the items was only 5 verl d'or, Osta's conscience wouldn't allow him to charge full price, hence the discount.

Lumian didn't mind. The arrangement saved him a great deal of time.

Naturally, he didn't push to pay more, handing Osta a sum of banknotes amounting to the quoted price of 20 verl d'or.

The four items were contained in either modest glassware or small wooden boxes and cloth bags. Lumian inspected them individually before sliding them into his pocket.

His gaze once again fell on Osta Trul. “Any further insights on the aquatic monster?”

Osta nodded. “Indeed.”

His expression bore a plea for affirmation.

“In my effort to gather more information about the aquatic monsters, I even ventured into the underground river myself. Regrettably, the ground was treacherous, and I ended up taking a tumble.”

He pulled up his sleeve, revealing the distinct marks of his slip on his forearm.

So that’s why his posture seemed off… If I hadn’t requested Osta to gather information on the aquatic monster, would he have avoided the injury? Yet I only enlisted him after foreseeing an imminent accident. What could have transpired if I had rescinded? A feeling of inevitability wrapped Lumian.

He was also a pawn in the game of destiny, his actions and will embedded in the luck he sensed.

Lumian curtailed his musing and responded with a light chuckle.

“I did advise you to be cautious.”

The recollection of Ciel’s warning for the upcoming days suddenly sprung to mind.

Did it manifest so rapidly? Is his divination prowess truly this potent? Amid his astonishment, Osta queried, “You divined I would be injured within the next two days?”

What Sequence does Ciel belong to?

Not only does he appear combat-savvy, but his divination skills are impressive!

A grin played at the corners of Lumian’s mouth.

“It’s not divination.”

He held back further explanation, leaving Osta to his own conjectures.

Seeming to take the hint, Osta didn’t press further. Instead, he shifted the conversation back to the aquatic monster.

“I’ve been able to piece together the whispers and conjecture, and it seems there are three kinds of aquatic monsters in the underground river:

“The first appears to be a drowned corpse, bloated and eerily pale. The second resembles a grotesquely mutated fish, standing nearly as tall as a man, covered in sturdy scales that seem impervious to harm. The third bears an uncanny resemblance to strands of black hair floating atop the water, only to suddenly reach out and ensnare the unwary souls on the banks, dragging them under.

“These aquatic monsters, however, aren’t particularly formidable. Most of their attacks on humans end in failure, which accounts for the abundance of tales and rumors.

“They’re an elusive lot. Sometimes seen two or three times a month, sometimes they disappear entirely. I ventured down there last night myself, but aside from my unfortunate slip, I found no trace of them.”

Lumian scoffed at this, saying, “With your level of combat prowess, I wouldn’t bet on your return if you ran into one of them.”

Osta only managed a sheepish smile in response, not deigning to refute the comment.

The only reason he dared to venture there was due to the aquatic monsters’ reputed weakness and his own divination.

Lumian’s brow furrowed in contemplation. Given the aquatic monsters’ record, any Beyonder team from the two Churches or Bureau 8 could effortlessly eradicate them. So, why were they still prevalent?

If the underground river concealed a greater peril, any poor soul encountering the aquatic monster should have no chance of escape.

As these thoughts spun in his mind, Lumian took the materials Osta Trul had provided and carefully concealed them between a pair of nearby rocks.

He was cautious, thinking that should he engage in a heated battle with the aquatic creature in the future, these delicate items might get damaged.

Afterward, Lumian handed Osta a 5 verl d’or note.

“This is for your insights about the aquatic monsters.”

Lumian picked up his carbide lamp and, following Osta’s instructions and the tunnel signs, began his journey towards the underground river.

A few moments of hesitation later, Osta quickly rose, grabbing his own carbide lamp and hurriedly following Lumian.

Upon hearing the rapid footsteps, Lumian spun around, his puzzled gaze landing on Osta.

Osta managed a strained smile and said, “I’ll come with you. I might be of some assistance.”

“You?” Lumian couldn’t veil his incredulous disdain.

Osta cleared his throat before divulging his actual motive.

“The aquatic monster is a spiritual being. It’s improbable that you’ll want everything. I-I’m hoping to scavenge what you leave behind.”

If fortune smiled upon him and he found a buyer for the parts, he could make a tidy sum of more than ten verl d’or!

Lumian merely stared at Osta, letting the tension build before finally breaking into a grin.

“You’re welcome to tag along, but don’t expect me to play your bodyguard.”

From what he could discern, Osta’s luck was veering away from a bloody end and instead showing promise of a minor financial windfall.

Essentially, if Osta joined him on this underground river expedition, it implied that the hunt might be relatively safe and potentially lucrative.

Of course, Lumian couldn’t be entirely sure that his decision wouldn’t sway the course of Osta’s luck.

“No problem.” Osta replied, devoid of apprehension.

In his mind, he’d merely be tailing Ciel from a distance. If they happened to encounter an aquatic monster, he’d simply keep a wider berth. The threat to his own life seemed minimal at best.

Osta’s unwavering resolution prompted Lumian to study him a moment longer.

Seeing that his luck hadn’t shifted, Lumian lifted his gaze, picked up his carbide lamp and resumed his journey forward.

In a way, having someone like Osta trailing behind had its benefits.

Sometimes, the art of fishing required bait. On other occasions, in the face of a formidable monster, one needn’t outrun the beast. One just needed to outpace their so-called allies!

The two of them ventured deeper into the subterranean world, each step guided by the flickering light of their carbide lamps.

After roughly ten minutes, they were engulfed by an escalating humidity, and Lumian could discern the faint murmur of flowing water.

He held his lamp aloft, casting an eye over the tunnel signage before veering into a pathway shrouded in darkness to his right.

Soon, the telltale shimmer of water, distorted by the lamp's radiance, beckoned ahead.

Lumian approached the underground river with caution.

It stretched five to six meters wide, ensconced beneath a naturally-formed stone dome peppered with stalactites. The water was relatively clear, meandering through the carved gullies.

Apart from a scattering of moss, Lumian detected no signs of life at first glance.

Osta had already ceased advancing, observing from a safe distance as the dangerous Beyonder meticulously combed through the riverside.

The pair maintained a distance of over ten meters, sporadically progressing and halting.

Fifteen minutes elapsed, and Lumian's search bore no fruit.

Half an hour passed, and the situation remained unchanged.

As the path ahead began to constrict, Lumian's keen eye spotted some anomalies.

By the riverbank, several rocks lay scattered, their edges tinged with soil.

A struggle here? This thought nudged Lumian's heart as he cautiously neared the area.

He crouched down, setting the carbide lamp aside and examined the vicinity with careful scrutiny.

Soon enough, he discovered a pair of footprints and signs of something being dragged away.

Yet, where these traces led, the river flowed transparent and calm. The riverbed was clearly visible and bore no hint of lurking dangers.

Drip. A solitary droplet of liquid landed on Lumian's nape.

It was chilly and adhesive.

An immediate sense of peril overwhelmed Lumian. Without delay, he jerked his head upwards.

In the cavernous interlude between stalactites, a glistening figure of grayish-white writhed.

Its head resembled a python, the body slick with scales akin to a fish. From where fins should have been, emerged two arms and a single leg, eerily human-like.

The monster's mouth gaped open, unveiling a neat row of ferocious white teeth. From its mouth corner dripped a viscous and foul-smelling liquid.

In the following heartbeat, the monster pounced, soaring towards Lumian.

Crouched on the ground, Lumian tumbled backwards.

Simultaneously, his body coiled like a spring, catapulting his right leg upwards in a swift whip-like motion.

With a satisfying crack, Lumian, teetering on the brink of falling, landed a solid kick on the airborne monster who failed to evade the strike, hurling it towards the opposing stone wall.

Crash!

The monster collided with the rocky facade.

Lumian was back on his feet, charging at his opponent with the feral urgency of a cheetah.

As the monster slid off the wall, Lumian's form was mirrored in its muddy yellow eyes.

Lumian reached out, seizing its arm.

The monster didn't evade but opened its palm to welcome the assault.

Each of its digits sprouted sharp scales, glinting ominously with a deep blue sheen.

Without warning, Lumian twisted his elbow and flicked his wrist, clasping the monster's wrist with both hands to thwart the menacing blue scales.

He then extended his right foot, sweeping away the monster's lone leg.

With just one leg, the monster was powerless to resist. Its only option was to harness Lumian's grip on its wrist to propel itself upward, its solitary leg trailing behind and its monstrous maw leading the charge, ready to devour Lumian's entire head.

At this critical moment, Lumian relinquished his hold, lowered his stance, and rolled towards the stone wall.

Thud!

The aquatic monster landed heavily behind him.

In a fluid motion, Lumian swiveled, snatching the monster's leg. Channeling his strength from the core, he swung it towards the stone wall.

Crash!

The monster's skull crumpled upon impact.

Lumian didn't pause. He maintained his swinging momentum, battering the monster against the pillar, the wall, and the floor, with dark red blood and pale yellow fluid splattering everywhere.

Amid the pounding sounds, craters formed on the stone wall, and the monster's skull started to fragment, the contents spilling out in a gruesome red tide.

More than ten meters away, Osta Trul stood agape, utterly mesmerized by the violent spectacle.

How savage!

Incredible!

Thump! Lumian unceremoniously dropped the mutilated, lifeless aquatic monster onto the ground.

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Chapter 160 - 160 Pervert

160 Pervert

Osta Trul had never questioned Ciel's competence in tackling the aquatic monster, yet the ruthless efficiency with which he dispatched it caught him off guard.

It felt much like witnessing an adult landing a blow on a child.

A persistent inquiry bobbed to the surface of Osta's thoughts.

To what path and Sequence could Ciel possibly belong?

Why could he engage in combat and appear to wield formidable prophetic capabilities?

Within a region speckled by dark-crimson and dull-golden symbols, Lumian crouched, brandishing his ceremonial silver dagger. He slid the blade into the monster's open wound, cleaving through its flesh, and deposited it in the hollow timber container prepared earlier.

Once two containers brimmed with the monster's flesh and scales casting a dim cerulean glow, he uncapped a metallic flask and began collecting the monster's blood that burbled ceaselessly.

Witnessing this, Osta methodically closed the gap between him and the vanquished monster, lingering nearby.

Before too long, Lumian rose, pivoted, and retraced his steps.

Scrambling, Osta hastily crouched and started amassing blood, scales, and what he believed to be spiritually rich organs.

His gaze frequently darted to Lumian, who was steadily increasing his distance, showing no signs of halting for Osta.

A sense of unease began to seep into Osta.

After all, Ciel had dispatched the aquatic monster with terrifying ease. Given his earlier performance, Osta feared that Ciel could also eliminate him without much effort. Should he remain alone by this subterranean river in the depth of the darkness, and should another monster be lured by the scent of blood, he would find himself in dire straits!

With a sense of urgency, Osta hastily stowed the harvested materials, not daring to dawdle. Fighting the temptation to salvage more of the monster's remains, he left a good 90% behind and hurried after Lumian.

As their carbide lamps winked out at the tunnel's end, darkness reclaimed the area, save for the perpetual whisper of water.

After an indeterminate time had passed, a group of thrill-seeking university students made their way through the cavernous labyrinth, kerosene lanterns in hand.

They discovered a partially collapsed stone wall and a pathway disordered and fragmented.

Apart from that, all was serene and silent. Not a trace of the aquatic monster or blood stains were found.

…

Having bid Osta Trul adieu, Lumian found himself a seat in a public carriage, bound for Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Retrieving the remainder of his ingredients from Auberge du Coq Doré's Room 207, he grasped his carbide lamp and plunged once more into the realm below ground.

As Lumian descended from the floor, mimicking the surface world, his pace slackened.

Under the glow of the carbide lamp, he noticed fresh, evident footprints marking the slightly damp path.

Heavy footprints… Lumian studied them for a moment, voicing his puzzlement.

From the looks of these prints, he concluded that the passerby must've weighed upwards of 100 kilograms, or been shouldering something hefty.

Who could it be? An underworld smuggler? Lumian had his suspicions, but he didn't intend to tail them.

Trier's subterranean labyrinth was brimming with people. Obsessing over each footprint would only exhaust him.

Besides, the other party had no quarrel with him. Provided they didn't interfere with his upcoming ritual magic, he had no concern even if he was ready to ensure their silence.

Turning the lamp's dial, Lumian tempered the reaction between carbide and water, thus dimming the flame's intensity and casting less light.

He was concerned that the maker of the footprints was near, and might detect the bright light closing in from behind.

Continuing his journey, Lumian suddenly halted, nose twitching.

He detected a familiar aroma.

A musky perfume designed to awaken masculine desires, intermingled with a citrus hint.

After a brief moment of mental rifling, Lumian identified the scent's owner.

Little Minx Jenna, the Showy Diva!

Could these be her footprints? Preposterous. Surely she doesn't weigh more than 100 kilograms? She's not cast of iron! Besides, the prints were clearly a man's… Lumian mulled over two possibilities.

Either Jenna is adept at concealing her tracks, leaving no corresponding marks, or she's been hoisted by a man…

It's quite ordinary for two individuals collectively to exceed 100 kilograms…

Judging by the footprints, the man stands between 1.65 and 1.7 meters tall. His gait seems slightly peculiar…

As Lumian turned this over in his mind, his brow furrowed.

Piqued by curiosity, he resolved to tail the trail and ascertain what predicament Jenna had stumbled upon, or rather, what scheme she was brewing.

It was crucial to note that this Showy Diva was suspected of being Franca's paramour. Her entanglement might reveal a clandestine secret of the Savoie Mob.

This could potentially provide Lumian, who was pursuing "loftier heights," with an opportunity.

Lowering the carbide lamp's intensity further, he hoped that once switched off, the flame would snuff out promptly.

Sticking to the tunnel's shadows, he tracked the footprints, vigilantly gauging the distance. Should anything go awry, he was ready to extinguish the light.

As the footprints appeared increasingly fresh, as though only moments old, he extinguished the carbide lamp and ventured forward in the darkness, relying on his memorized path.

Before he knew it, Lumian had reached a divergence in the path, a faint blue light emanating from the stone wall's end on his left side.

Slipping his black gloves on, Lumian inched closer, a wraith in the shadows.

The blue light radiated from a small cave nestled at the end of the stone wall.

Stationed against the stone, Lumian tucked himself into the shadow's embrace, craning his neck ever so slightly to catch a glimpse of what lay within.

At the cave's heart, a rather primitive iron-black carbide lamp sat in a relatively flat expanse.

Nearby, a capacious bag of grayish-white fabric bulged, seemingly at its full capacity.

A man loomed beside the bag, adorned in a blue cap, a common tweed suit of brown that one would see in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, with a linen shirt peeking out from beneath his darker jacket.

The man's breathing was noticeably labored. Standing nearly 1.7 meters tall, his side profile revealed a thin and slightly worn countenance, his brown eyes ablaze with unmasked desire.

Lumian's gaze dropped, registering the man's arousal.

He inwardly chided, Impatient, aren't we? No wonder he was lagging. That explains the irregularity in his footprints.

Lumian grew more convinced that the bag concealed none other than Jenna, the Little Minx.

She must have fallen prey to a kidnapper and rapist.

The man proceeded to remove his cap, casting it aside as his heavy panting echoed through the cave.

His countenance was laid bare before Lumian.

His eyebrows, pale and disordered, were sparse. His eyes sagged slightly at the corners. His nose was a hint of red at the tip, and his mouth bore dry, cracked lips. His complexion was a shade too pale, betraying signs of fatigue and exertion.

The man squatted, loosening the bag's ties, revealing its contents.

Lumian's intuition proved correct—it was indeed Jenna, the "Showy Diva."

Her customarily tied brownish-yellow hair was in disarray, cascading over her body. Her eyes were sealed shut, framed by a layer of deep shadows. Adorned in a white blouse and a beige fluffy short skirt, it was unclear whether she had lost or hadn't yet donned her mole.

As the man drew Jenna from the bag, his breathing was so labored that Lumian could discern it effortlessly, even if he wasn't a Hunter.

Such a strong desire… bordering on the perverse… Lumian found himself thinking this almost subconsciously.

Stumbling upon such a scenario, he resolved to come to Jenna's aid while he was here. If the Savoie Mob's boss ever considered appointing a new leader, "Red Boots" Franca might vouch for him.

But a hasty rescue wasn't on his agenda. Lumian intended to observe further, ascertain whether the man possessed any unique abilities that emboldened him to cross a leader of the Savoie Mob, "Red Boots" Franca.

He would swoop in once the man was mid-stripping, incapacitated in his haste.

If only I had a long-range weapon. This wouldn't be such a chore… Lumian heaved a sigh, pondering on getting the Savoie Mob to supply him with a firearm.

The man's hands found their way to Jenna's face, patting it lightly twice.

Next, he withdrew a small metal bottle, unscrewing the cap and brought it to Jenna's nose.

Achoo!

A sneeze jolted Jenna awake, her eyes fluttering open.

The man's visage reflected in her wide blue eyes, sparking alarm. An instinctive urge to rise seized her.

But in the next moment, she registered the absence of strength in her body, rendering resistance futile.

"Damn you, dog sh*t, what do you think you're doing?" Jenna mustered enough strength to spit out the words.

A twisted smile spread across the man's face.

"Do you know? I've watched you sing countless times. Each time, the desire to tear away your clothing and have you perform solely for me is overwhelming."

Jenna hurled back, her voice seething with rage, "You lunatic, a bastard who deserves being f*cked by a donkey! You're done for! The Savoie Mob will have you sleeping with the fishes!"

The man remained silent, his brown eyes gleaming with a peculiar light.

Jenna's cheeks flushed crimson, and her breathing grew shallow.

Her body twitched involuntarily, her eyes widening in shock at her own reaction.

“This is just perfect. Not only a hint of resistance but a subconscious acquiescence too…” The man stood up, brimming with anticipation, rapidly disrobing his clothes, trousers, and shoes.

Lumian, observing from his hidden spot, felt a sudden jolt of alarm.

Jenna’s reaction is abnormal! Could she be under the influence of some Beyonder power?

Did every human and dog in Trier have access to Beyonder powers?

Has Jenna been coerced into arousal? This… This bears an uncanny resemblance to Susanna Mattise and Monsieur Ive’s act…

Lumian’s thoughts spiraled as he drew out the ritual silver dagger, tucking it into his right pocket with the blade pointed inward and the hilt pressing against the outer cloth.

Lowering his body, he silently moved from the stone wall into the cave, stealthily approaching the man from the shadow’s edge.

The man’s attention was fully riveted on Jenna. His eyes blazed with a fanatic light, his face twisted into a perverse grin. As he worked his belt loose and shed his trousers, his gaze roved over Jenna’s form.

Emerging from the shadows, Lumian sprang forth like a cheetah on the prowl.

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Chapter 161 - 161 Special Traits

161 Special Traits

It was only when Lumian sprung from the darkness that the man—his gaze fixated solely on Jenna—realized the invasion of his secluded lair.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Lumian stormed in, raining a barrage of fists, elbows, knees, and feet upon the intruder.

The man was taken aback, yet not feeble. His resistance was robust, fending off blows with forearms while retreating. His chest, calves, and thighs bore the brunt of Lumian's missed strikes, but he held his ground.

With a shake of his head, his brown eyes morphed into a haunting green, casting an eerie reflection of Lumian.

Suddenly, Lumian was overwhelmed by a powerful surge of desire. Beside him, "Showy Diva" Jenna radiated a captivating allure as she strained to watch the struggle, her whole being pulsating with magnetism.

This desire exploded within Lumian like a live grenade. He ceased his assault, eyes smoldering with a reddish hue as his breaths quickened. Whirling around, he lunged towards Jenna.

Jenna sensed the abnormality and bellowed out, her voice a mix of anger and fear, "Pull yourself f*cking together!"

But her words were smothered as Lumian pinned her down.

In tandem with this action, a hard object pressed against Lumian's right side.

What was that? Reacting instinctively, his hand grazed the hilt of the ritual silver dagger he'd strategically placed for self-injury.

A vague understanding of his intent to use it flickered back into his mind.

In the next heartbeat, Lumian—now mostly irrational from his burgeoning desire—seized the handle of the silver dagger and drove it into his own flesh.

The silver tip sliced through cloth, skin, and muscle alike.

Excruciating pain thundered into Lumian's consciousness, restoring some rationality from the grips of his wild desire, allowing him to regain some lucidity.

Pretending nothing had changed, he continued his actions on Jenna, his hands wandering aimlessly.

“Are you f*cking useless? Can’t even handle a pervert!” Jenna scolded, hoping to jolt her lone protector back to reality.

Seeing his opponent under control, the man hastily retrieved his own concealed dagger, preparing to strike Lumian from behind.

Just then, Lumian’s hands slid and he steadied himself against the cool cave floor beside Jenna.

With a swift motion, he flexed his waist and kicked his right foot backward.

Whack!

Lumian struck, his attack to the man’s groin swift and precise, akin to a whip’s snap.

A guttural crunch echoed, the man’s visage draining of color as pain contorted his features.

Clatter! His weapon slipped from his grasp.

Not one to squander an advantage, Lumian lunged, ensnaring his prey in a swift embrace.

His right arm snaked up, seizing the man’s head and wrenching it with an unyielding force.

Crack!

The man was granted a view of his own back, his focus mercifully diverted from the torment below.

Once his adversary’s life was unequivocally extinguished, Lumian withdrew his arms and produced his ritual silver dagger. With a white bandage he had in his possession, he attended to his own wound.

He held no fear of infection—even if such an eventuality arose, his Provoker constitution would endure until the 6 a.m. of the next day.

The primary purpose of his first-aid efforts was to prevent the cave from retaining traces of blood.

Jenna, sprawled on the cold ground, mustered the strength to hoist herself up. She observed as Lumian retracted his deadly grip and the man crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Just like that? A shiver of shock rippled through her, effectively quelling her previously stoked desires.

She was no naive observer. She had gauged the formidable, almost magical aura of that lecherous man, but he was annihilated in mere seconds by this handsome rural lad!

Barely a heartbeat—eight or nine seconds at most—had transpired before a life was extinguished.

Upon tending to his injury, Lumian collected the man's outer garments and moved towards Jenna. She blinked out of her stupor and queried curiously, "Why are you here?"

Almost reflexively, she added jokingly, "Don't say you're enamored by me and have been trailing me?"

Lumian's response was a soft chuckle as he squatted down, drawing Jenna's hands behind her back.

"What are you doing?" Jenna's voice teetered on panic.

Despite her feeble struggles, Lumian effortlessly secured her wrists using the man's shirt.

In the blink of an eye, he pulled a dark jacket over Jenna's head, blocking her sight completely.

"Dogsh*t, bastard, pervert, what do you want?" Jenna's words tumbled out, a jumble of anger, anxiety, and confusion.

Lumian dismissed her outburst. Ripping off the remaining piece of his shirt, he wadded it up and thrust it into Jenna's ears and mouth.

"Mmmmm…" Jenna was silenced.

A resignation washed over her as she thought, Fine, I'll endure this like a dog bite. As long as he doesn't kill me…

Yet, her apprehension was met with stillness. Lumian had risen, leaving her side to approach the lifeless form on the cave floor.

Upon purifying his ritual silver dagger and wiping it clean, Lumian circumnavigated the petite cave, weaving a wall of spirituality.

Next, he commenced the Summoning Dance.

His intention was to invoke a spirit via this rite!

Despite this method's efficacy falling notably short compared to traditional psychic spells, the goal of the Summoning Dance wasn't strictly spirit invocation. Nevertheless, it was far better than the alternative—doing nothing.

His spirituality melded with natural forces and diffused in every direction, but was confined within the wall of spirituality enveloping the cave.

Thus, the summoning wouldn't attract any unwanted entities.

In the midst of the chaotic, mesmerizing dance, Lumian perceived the spectral form of the man.

Drawing the ritual silver dagger, he let a droplet of blood fall, commanding the spirit to bond with him.

Almost instantaneously, Lumian was gripped by a chilling sensation as an unusual and fervent heat ignited within him. This was accompanied by an overwhelming desire for women.

Is this an actual side-effect? Does it parallel the insatiable hunger experienced with the mouth-orifice monster? Lumian made a conscious effort to avoid glancing at Jenna, who was now bound and blindfolded, as he noted his newly acquired "head."

Since the man had recently perished, his other "head" was saturated with lingering emotions such as lust, pain, fury, loathing, and the instinctive urge to utilize his distinctive traits. Also present were traces of obsessions and the most profound memories.

Analyzing the situation, Lumian understood that this pervert possessed far more abilities and traits than the mouth-orifice monster.

"Inciting avarice in others;

"Becoming miserly and greedy, able to detect items that once belonged to him;

"Stimulating others' appetites;

"Maintaining a robust and healthy physical state;

"Existing in perpetual hunger and thirst;

"Constantly utilizing mental faculties to augment strength, reflexes, agility, and resilience;

"Employing one's gaze, speech, and actions to subtly induce a measure of lust in the target.

"Through direct contact and spell-like abilities, the target will experience varying degrees of lust.

“Preparing rape drugs and the like.

“Differentiating hormonal information of various individuals…”

Did Monsieur Ive utilize the first one? This pervert is indeed connected to Monsieur Ive and Susanna Mattise… A constant state of hunger and thirst. No wonder he targeted Jenna and dared to abduct her. Can this be categorized as a negative effect? Indeed, Jenna may not be his first victim… Lumian didn’t select any specific trait. He was limited to general observations of the spectral companion and was unable to comprehend any of the more nuanced abilities.

Lumian made an attempt to amplify the man’s most profound memories.

Suddenly, he was in the midst of a bustling theater. On stage stood a young woman clad in a divine white dress, her deeply carved features accented by lake-like eyes, crystal clear and rippling with innocence and charm.

Charlotte Calvino… Lumian identified the woman instantly. She was the reigning star of the Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Simultaneously, Lumian felt the man’s excitement, the predatory hunger within him intensifying.

However, with the crowd around, he refrained from any untoward behavior. He bolted to the lavatory as soon as the scene concluded.

As the memory faded, Lumian ceased the Summoning Dance, letting the man’s spirit withdraw from his being.

Almost immediately, he performed the Summoning Dance again, inviting the spirit to rejoin him.

This was because each possession allowed Lumian to select only one trait, one memory, or one obsession. Once chosen, it was irrevocable.

Lumian had opted for one of the spirit’s most poignant memories.

In the next instant, Jenna appeared before him, giving an overtly dramatic performance on-stage.

“…” The situation became clear to Lumian. He couldn’t resist clenching his jaw and cursing, “Is there nothing else in your mind but women, women, women!”

He abandoned the idea of spirit channeling, regretting that he hadn’t yet achieved the status of a Contractee, unable to forge a long-term contract with the spirit and borrow a skill. Lumian appraised the man’s traits, certain that some of them would prove immensely useful in combat.

If only I could rear this spirit… Lumian sighed, conceding his present limitations.

Subsequently, he dissolved the spiritual barrier, sheathed his ritual silver dagger, and returned to Jenna. He removed the jacket shrouding her eyes and the shirt binding her hands.

Jenna winced, plucking the cloth from her mouth and ears.

She massaged her reddened wrist, throwing a skeptical look at Lumian who was busy searching the pockets of the man's clothing. She inquired, "Why did you blindfold me and block my ears earlier?"

"I was protecting you. You shouldn't see or hear what isn't meant for you," Lumian responded in a half-jesting tone, his search yielding a total of 8 verl d'or coins and three somewhat antiquated metal canisters.

Perceiving no threat from him, Jenna huffed. "What could possibly be unseen or unheard here? Unless you… you didn't… with the corpse…"

Her voice faded as she connected a few dots, roughly guessing that Lumian might have been using some power to extract information from the corpse.

Upon noticing Lumian evaluating the three metal canisters, Jenna deflected the topic and reminisced, "One of these bottles contains a gas that knocks you out, leaving you feeble. That's how he abducted me.

"Also, another bottle has this gas, extremely foul-smelling but strangely enough, it wakes you up. Damn, that pervert deserves being f*cked by a donkey!

"I don't know what's in the remaining bottle, and I can't distinguish between the other two."

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Chapter 162 - 162 Fresh Corpse

162 Fresh Corpse

Lumian crouched down, clutching the three metal canisters in his hands. He cast a glance at Jenna, a mischievous smile playing on his lips.

“I know just the way to confirm it.”

“What…” Jenna’s curiosity piqued, but soon a hint of nervousness and panic crept into her expression, triggered by Lumian’s enigmatic smile.

Unfazed by her reaction, Lumian responded with a smile of his own.

“Help me determine which canister is which,” he suggested.

“What sort of joke is this?” Jenna thought, grateful for the fact that had Lumian not saved her and aware of her own weakened state, she would have unleashed a stream of curses.

However, Lumian’s expression turned serious.

“Rest assured, if it contains the gas that knocks you out, the worst that can happen is you fainting again. I won’t harm you, and even if I wanted to, you wouldn’t be able to resist. Besides, once we ascertain which canister is which, I can use a stimulating gas to revive you and bring you back to normal.”

“If luck is on your side and you encounter the stimulating gas, you’ll regain most of your strength immediately,” Lumian added.

That makes sense. Regardless of the outcome, it can’t possibly be harmful. She was almost convinced by Lumian’s words.

However, snapping out of her daze, Jenna clenched her teeth and voiced her concerns.

“But what if you end up selecting the other canister? We have no idea what it contains!”

If it turned out to be poisonous gas, there was no one present with the knowledge to treat her.

Lumian responded with a mocking tone, a smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth, “Are you daft? Canisters filled mostly with gas and those containing liquid have a significant weight difference!”

“This particular bottle should be filled with liquid!”

He picked up one of the metal canisters and gave it a slight shake.

He “clearly” heard the unmistakable sloshing sound of liquid inside before pocketing it.

“Is that so…” Although Jenna had been mocked, her attention was focused on the “experiment,” and anger didn’t consume her.

After a few seconds of hesitation, she closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly, determined.

“Go ahead, give it a try!”

Lumian stowed one of the metal bottles in his pants pocket, leaving only one in his grasp.

With a leisurely pace, he brought it near Jenna’s nose.

In the next moment, Jenna slowly cracked open her eyes.

In an instant, an intensely pungent odor, reminiscent of fermented excrement, assailed Jenna’s senses, causing her to sneeze repeatedly. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, and her nose threatened to drip.

However, each sneeze served as a catalyst, restoring a significant portion of her strength. As Lumian sealed the canister and rose from his crouch, Jenna leaped to her feet, instinctively stretching her limbs.

Jenna happily adjusted her clothing and skirt, muttering to herself, “Seems like luck is on my side!”

On her first attempt, she managed to obtain the canister with the foul-smelling gas.

But then she noticed Lumian’s playful expression.

Jenna’s heart skipped a beat, sensing that something was off.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she inquired, “Did you already know which gas canister was which from the start?”

Is that the reason he was able to accurately select the metal canister containing the pungent gas?

Lumian grinned and handed the metal canister to Jenna.

“Smell the cap for yourself.”

Jenna eyed the canister suspiciously before cautiously sniffing the bottle.

A faint odor lingered, not particularly stimulating or potent, but still unpleasant.

“The other canister has no scent,” Lumian added with a smile.

Jenna’s flushed face turned an even deeper shade of red.

She felt foolish, having believed the words of the other party and willingly taken part in the so-called “experiment.”

Any feelings of gratitude she had prepared were instantly quashed.

Ignoring Jenna’s enraged state, Lumian pocketed the 8 verl d’or banknote and marked the metal canister with a scratch before stowing it away.

Though the man possessed the ability to sense the whereabouts of items that had once belonged to him, Lumian wasn’t afraid of being tracked since the man was already dead.

As for the function of the liquid in the remaining metal canister, he planned to test it on rats, stray dogs, and other animals.

Having completed the necessary tasks, Lumian pointed at the pervert’s lifeless body and instructed Jenna, “Take a good look at him and commit his face to memory. We’ll need to investigate who he is.”

“He probably has accomplices.”

“Alright.” Jenna strode toward the corpse, earnestly engraving his face into her memory.

After observing for a while, the recent events flooded back into her mind, fueling her anger. She raised her right leg and ruthlessly kicked the pervert’s groin.

Again and again, without restraint.

“Dogsh*t, pervert, damn your mother, damn your entire family!” Jenna vented her emotions to her heart’s content.

Lumian winced, feeling a twinge of pain, as he lowered his head to clean up the remnants at the scene.

Once Jenna had calmed down, he approached her with a large grayish-white cloth bag. As he stuffed the corpse and clothes inside, he casually inquired, “How did he abduct you?”

Jenna smoothed her disheveled brownish-yellow hair and tied it back into a simple ponytail.

Gritting her teeth, she recounted, “I encountered him in an alley next to the Salle de Bal Brise. He claimed to be a fan of my singing and asked for an autograph.

The paper he handed me was sprinkled with that odorless gas. As soon as I signed it, I sensed something was wrong and lost most of my strength.

“After that, he attacked me, restrained me, and brought the bottle to my nose. That’s when I passed out.”

Lumian couldn’t help but mock, “Aren’t you being too careless?”

Jenna didn’t agree.

“I’ve seen him several times while singing. I was certain that he genuinely enjoyed listening to me. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have given him the time of day.

“And, as an unknown singer, it’s an honor to have someone ask for your autograph…

“Besides, the gas doesn’t have any smell!”

How could anyone have guarded against this?

Lumian scoffed.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s obvious that the gas dissipates quickly on paper. It needs to be used within a short period of time to have a certain effect. In other words, that pervert has been tailing you for a while and has probably figured out your routines. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have cornered you so accurately in an empty alley and tainted the paper with the gas ten to twenty seconds in advance.

“Didn’t you notice despite being followed for so long?”

Jenna fell silent, at times clenching her teeth, at times frustrated.

Lumian shifted his gaze and chuckled.

It was understandable that she didn’t notice. That guy could discern hormonal information from different individuals.

If it weren’t for the fact that Monsieur Ive was clearly weaker than the pervert and probably hadn’t mastered the power of lust, Lumian would have suspected that his identity as a “robber” had been exposed.

He resealed the grayish-white cloth bag and used it to further erase any traces at the scene. Observing this, Jenna lent him a hand.

She’s quite skilled at dealing with evidence… Lumian glanced at Jenna and left the cave with the cloth bag slung over his back, harboring some suspicions.

Due to Jenna intentionally not mentioning her unusual behavior under the influence of the pervert, Lumian believed that this Showy Diva had some understanding of the Beyonder world, or she might even be one herself.

And her source of information or power most likely stemmed from “Red Boots” Franca from the Savoie Mob.

When Lumian arrived at his hiding spot, he ignited the carbide lamp and held it in his hand, glancing back at the depths of the path.

The path descended. There was darkness in the distance,

a void that swallowed everything as it lay in wait for its prey to approach.

“What are you looking at?” Jenna asked curiously.

She sensed that Ciel was acting mysterious.

Lumian ended his gaze and smiled.

“I’m wondering where we’ll end up if we keep going down. Perhaps the Trier from the Fourth Epoch?”

In reality, what he was truly pondering was:

The abnormal ability displayed just now was strikingly similar to Monsieur Ive’s. If the two of them were accomplices, would they instinctively choose a familiar place in the underground world for the crime? The same underground destination where Monsieur Ive had entered that night?

If that were the case, perhaps he would uncover something if he continued down this path.

Disappointed, Jenna remarked, “That’s not a good place.”

Lumian remained silent as he retraced his steps along the path. Lost in her own thoughts, Jenna followed silently, clutching the carbide lamp left behind by the pervert.

Just as he was about to reach the level that roughly replicated the layout aboveground, Lumian halted and said with a contemptuous smile, “Do you need me to escort you to the surface?”

“You’re not going back?” Jenna asked, surprised.

Lumian shrugged. “I need to find a suitable place to dispose of this corpse.”

Jenna nodded and refrained from prying further. “I can ascend on my own. I’ve been underground before.”

Does that imply you possess the means to protect yourself? Lumian watched Jenna depart with light footsteps, inwardly sighing.

Does every human and dog in Trier have access to Beyonder powers?

Is something amiss with Trier, or is something amiss with me? Why do I always encounter such individuals?

Shaking his head, he hoisted the corpse onto his back. As he dealt with the footprints, he made his way toward the hidden quarry cave where he had previously sought the boon.

Along the way, he performed two instances of anti-tracking to ensure no one was tailing him.

Upon reaching the underground quarry cave, Lumian tossed aside the grayish-white cloth bag containing the corpse and arranged the altar.

Initially, he had intended to visit the nearest hospital morgue during the night to acquire fresh corpses, but now he had a better option!

After setting up the altar, lighting the candles, and constructing a wall of spirituality, Lumian retrieved the pre-drawn faux goatskin adorned with the corresponding symbol.

The central pattern on the paper consisted of a ring formed by thorns, encircled by symbols representing eyes, curves, and rivers.

Just tracing these patterns in Room 207 had drained Lumian's spirituality.

With the faux goatskin in place, Lumian took two steps back and gazed at the flickering candles, preparing for the subsequent incantation.

In this ritual, one couldn't employ the phrase "I! I summon in my name" to beseech oneself. Instead, they had to craft a three-line description of their being and feign the role of a creature from the spirit world.

It could be done in any manner, devoid of any wielding of authority, as long as it could pinpoint the location within the wall of spirituality.

Lumian parted his lips and muttered in Hermes, "Cordu Village's Trickster King, Aurore Lee's younger brother, an entity known as Lumian Lee…"

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Chapter 163 - 163 Three Questions

163 Three Questions

The flame of the orange candle, representing the focal point of the prayer, flickered as though stirred by an unseen breeze. Apart from that, it remained unaffected, maintaining its ordinary hue without any hint of transformation.

Lumian sensed an unusual pulsation deep within his soul, as if a distant cry had reached his ethereal essence.

Temporarily unable to respond, he continued to recite the incantation.

“I implore you,

“I beseech to be bestowed the Prophetic Concoction…”

In this ritualistic spell, words like “help create” couldn’t be used. It had to be “bestowed” or “gifted.”

Lumian’s spirit trembled with each uttered word, like ripples extending outward, leaving him with an unsettling sensation of both elevation and dizziness.

Taking two steps forward, he surveyed the aquatic monster’s flesh, the lizard eyes, and the gray henbane. Retrieving the faux goatskin adorned with enigmatic symbols, he positioned it atop the orange candle’s flame, symbolizing the target of his prayer.

Once the faux goatskin was ignited and placed within the natural hollow of the stone altar, Lumian meticulously gathered tulip powder and other ingredients, sprinkling them into the flames.

A peculiar fragrance swiftly permeated the ethereal barrier, causing Lumian to experience hallucinations.

He witnessed a profusion of mystical symbols adorning the faux goatskin, materializing in the void, in constant motion and reconfiguration, perpetually altering their collective form.

Lumian stepped back and scrutinized the diverse materials on the altar. In a resonant voice infused with Hermes’ power, he invoked, “Tulip, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!

“…”

As Lumian uttered the final word, his spirit's ripples merged, granting him the illusion that he could graze the candle's flame with a mere touch of his palm.

Simultaneously, a searing sensation ignited within his chest, accompanied by a faint hum resonating in his ears. His surroundings spun, akin to being tossed into the air and spun around repeatedly.

Guided by his spirituality, Lumian extended his right hand, pressing it toward the candle's flame.

His vision dimmed as his spirituality surged forth, intertwining with the flames.

The candle's flame promptly expanded, casting a radiant and ethereal glow upon the entire altar.

The disparate ingredients of the Prophetic Concoction, once gathered, stirred and converged. Blood churned, and shadows undulated, crafting an exceptionally sinister tableau.

Struggling to maintain a steady flow of his spiritual essence, Lumian observed the physical components fade into specters, completing their reassembly.

A dark crimson phantom, infused with silver-black tincture, materialized before him, condensing into a murky liquid.

The liquid incessantly bubbled, each burst releasing sinuous tendrils of silver-black light, reminiscent of slithering serpents.

Lumian advanced two steps, seizing a metal canister from the altar. Unscrewing its lid, he positioned it beneath the liquid's surface.

Having placed the vessel containing the Prophetic Concoction back on the altar, Lumian composed himself, preparing his mental state.

As Lumian calmed the ripples within his spirit, he recollected the entire process of the ritual.

If the thorn symbol hadn't reached a certain level of activation, elevating my status, I wouldn't have been able to respond and the endeavor would have failed… I can only perform two similar ritualistic spells consecutively… Lumian ruminated, gradually finding his thoughts settling.

Completing the five ritualistic spells required a minimum of Sequence 7, or even Contractee. Lumian, an Alms Monk of Sequence 8, could only accomplish it by relying on the corruption within his body.

Correspondingly, his spirituality couldn't endure for much longer.

After concluding the ritual and tidying the altar, Lumian dispelled the ethereal barrier and approached the grayish-white cloth bag to drag out the lifeless body.

With gentle care, he twisted the other party's head to its original position and opened the mouth.

Bathed in the glow of the blue carbide lamp, Lumian retrieved the Prophetic Concoction, unscrewed its lid, and poured the dark liquid into the corpse's mouth.

Rather than immediately permeating through the larynx, the liquid remained within, akin to a pool of water.

Suddenly, Lumian sensed the quarry's breeze turning colder, and the carbide lamp's light deepened to a richer blue.

Almost simultaneously, he heard a rumbling sound, witnessing the corpse's throat writhe as it consumed all of the Prophetic Concoction.

In the next moment, the naked corpse sat upright, engulfed in an unnatural darkness that defied illumination.

His eyes snapped open upon his pallid, worn face. The once-brown irises had lost their color, now crystal-clear and devoid of hue.

Within the depths of those translucent eyes, layers of vibrant colors seemed to reside. A pure light hung high, countless nearly imperceptible figures, and flickering silver radiance…

Withstanding the bone-chilling cold, Lumian composed himself and inquired, "Where will Guillaume Bénet, the former padre from Cordu Village in Dariège, Riston Province, Intis Republic, appear in a month?"

During the interim, Lumian had contemplated the three questions he wished to pose.

Four primary rules governed the questioning:

First, it must pertain to the future. Inquiries regarding someone's whereabouts or past actions were forbidden.

Secondly, the description had to be precise enough, or an unanswered query would arise. The name Guillaume Bénet was commonplace in other parts of Intis. Numerous individuals shared the same name. Unless the village of origin was specified, the corpse might reveal the future fate of a different Guillaume Bénet.

Thirdly, regardless of the corpse's country of origin or familiarity with the corresponding language, it would respond in the same language as the question posed.

Lastly, a question could only contain one element requiring an answer. It could not be framed in the manner of "when and where will it be?"

The corpse's pale countenance took on a dark green tinge. It parted its lips and uttered in Intis, "Trier's Quartier de la Princesse Rouge."

The voice resonated with an illusory and ethereal quality, as if it emanated from another realm. It bore no resemblance to the deceased's living voice.

So, it can only be narrowed down to the Quartier de la Princesse Rouge? Lumian's brow furrowed slightly.

He could comprehend the reason behind it—this was not a Prophetic Concoction obtained from hidden entities. Its creator was essentially an Alms Monk, hence the effects naturally wouldn't be outstanding.

Lumian proceeded to raise his second question.

"Where will I encounter Louis Lund, the former butler of the village administrator in Cordu Village, Dariège, Riston Province, Intis Republic?"

He refrained from mentioning Madame Pualis since he was uncertain of her connection to Madame Night. He feared that her elevated status might interfere with the prophecy's accuracy.

The corpse's eyes remained vacant and translucent as it gazed ahead. It responded with an ethereal voice, "Trier's Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman Avenue du Marché."

Avenue du Marché? It seems Louis Lund's presence there isn't mere happenstance… Lumian mused, a sense of satisfaction washing over him.

As he contemplated, he noticed the strange visions reflected in the corpse's transparent eyes gradually fading. Acting swiftly, he posed his third question.

"Where will Monsieur Ive, the proprietor of Auberge du Coq Doré in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, be from 11 p.m. to 12 p.m. this Sunday?"

Having observed Monsieur Ive previously entering the underground at this time, Lumian sought to ascertain the specifics of his destination.

Considering that Monsieur Ive had recently been "robbed" and had visited the police headquarters, he might refrain from venturing into the underground for the time being. Lumian specified the time as Sunday.

The corpse swiftly replied, "Trier's Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."

With that, the corpse thudded to the ground and closed its eyes once more, emanating the putrid stench of death.

Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons once again… Lumian bundled the corpse back into the cloth bag, intending to bury it even deeper underground.

…

In front of a beige three-story building, a stubbly-bearded tramp found himself cornered by two valets beside a pillar.

“I-I’ll leave now,” he stammered, trembling.

At that moment, a man dressed as a butler approached, his face filled with surprise.

“Master, is that you? Master!”

“What?” The tramp was perplexed.

The butler couldn’t contain his excitement.

“Don’t you remember? You’re the owner of this place, and we are all your loyal servants. You suffered a head injury and lost many memories. One day, you suddenly ran away from home.

“It’s been months. I’ve finally found you! You’ve returned!”

“I’m not, I’m not…” The tramp remembered his past clearly.

However, the butler and the two valets refused to listen to his explanation. They “encircled” him and led him into the building.

“Madam, Madam, the Master has returned!” the butler shouted with elation.

Before long, the tramp laid eyes upon an elegant and beautiful woman.

She wore a light-green dress, her eyes exuding a mature allure.

Overwhelmed with joy, she burst into tears and threw herself into the tramp’s arms.

“You’re back! You’re finally back!”

As he inhaled the sweet scent of her perfume and felt the softness of her body against his, the tramp attempted to argue that he wasn’t her husband, but the words caught in his throat.

In a daze of confusion, he was guided to the dining room. There, under a crystal chandelier, he beheld a sumptuous feast—a dozen oysters, a pot of succulent chicken, a plate of beef stewed with prunes, suet pudding, salad, and a bottle of White Elixir wine…

Simultaneously, the tramp’s gaze fell upon the oil paintings adorning the walls of the dining room.

One of them was a portrait, strikingly similar to him.

Could it truly be me? But I recall every experience… Could there be another who bears my resemblance? The tramp grew even more bewildered.

After indulging in a hearty meal and savoring fine wines, he was led to the bedroom. Soon, the beautiful and elegant madam entered, dressed in a silk nightgown.

Her eyes shimmered with tears as she spoke, “Do you still remember my passion?”

The tramp’s breathing quickened, and he couldn’t resist taking a step forward.

The two of them embraced passionately, tumbling onto the bed, their desires overwhelming them.

In that moment, the tramp began to “believe” that he truly was the owner of this grand house. He had a beautiful wife, a professional butler, and a multitude of servants.

Even if the original master were to return, he would ensure that the other was exposed as a fraud!

…

Lumian resurfaced and entered Auberge du Coq Doré, carrying the extinguished carbide lamp.

Madame Fels, who manned the front desk, immediately stood up upon seeing him.

“Ciel—Monsieur Ciel, Baron Brignais wishes to meet you at the Salle de Bal Brise after dinner.”

Baron Brignais is seeking me? What could it be about? Lumian nodded.

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Chapter 164 - 164 Intelligence

164 Intelligence

Salle de Bal Brise, the café on the second floor.

Lumian strolled over to Baron Brignais with an air of nonchalance and took a seat.

Not only did he lack any sense of deference or humility, but he also showed a blatant disregard for basic politeness, as if they were equals.

Louis, standing discreetly behind Baron Brignais, silently shook his head.

He had encountered many such individuals before, and their fate had always been the same—either handed over to the police by the Savoie Mob or gravely wounded in a violent gunfight, losing their capabilities in the process. They had no choice but to become subservient, like dogs wagging their tails, in exchange for the gang's protection. Some met their demise due to various reasons, their bodies cast into the dark recesses of the underground world or packed into wooden barrels filled with stones and thrown into the depths of the Srenzo River.

"Good evening, Baron," Lumian greeted with a disarming smile.

Baron Brignais betrayed no sign of anger on his face. He leisurely took a puff from his mahogany-colored pipe and casually inquired, "Where have you been this afternoon?"

"Underground," Lumian responded, resembling the corpse that had imbibed the Prophecy Concoction. He answered the other party's questions without any elaboration.

If "Little Minx" Jenna and "Red Boots" Franca concealed the fact that he had dispatched the pervert and saved the former, his response would have been a display of utmost candor.

Baron Brignais appeared momentarily taken aback but refrained from further probing. As he rubbed the mahogany pipe in his hand, he calmly stated, "I have a task for you."

Without waiting for Lumian to inquire, he explained with a smile, "I hold great expectations for you. I believe you can become a crucial member of our Savoie Mob, entrusted with significant matters.

"However, my favorable opinion alone is insufficient. You must demonstrate strength that surpasses most and make contributions that garner their recognition."

A carrot dangling before a donkey? Lumian scoffed inwardly.

Outwardly, he deliberately narrowed his eyes.

“And what might this be about?”

Baron Brignais set aside his mahogany pipe, took a sip of his coffee, and adopted a soothing tone as he spoke,

“Assault any prominent member of the Poison Spur Mob. It would be best if you inflict severe injuries. Killing them outright works too.”

Lumian chuckled.

“Just two days ago, you cautioned me against causing a commotion and provoking an all-out conflict between the Poison Spur Mob and us.

“Aren’t you concerned that such actions might transpire, ultimately leading to you becoming a target of the police headquarters?”

Although he had intended to lie in wait for the Poison Spur Mob’s “Hammer” Ait, Lumian refused to be treated as a fool by Baron Brignais.

“You are far more intelligent than those who surround me.

“For the past two days, I’ve been closely observing the Poison Spur Mob’s reactions, and it seems they have no immediate plans for revenge against you.

“What does that imply?”

“It means they’re terrified of our Savoie Mob,” Lumian replied with a jest.

It was, of course, a jest. If the Poison Spur Mob feared the Savoie Mob, they would never have grown to become the second-largest mob in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Baron Brignais shook his head.

“In the past, they would have undoubtedly retaliated, exacting a higher toll than just medical expenses from our Savoie Mob.

“Moreover, after Margot’s demise, they merely put on a show on the surface. In reality, they took no actions that would attract the police’s attention. It seemed they were searching for the true assassin amidst the chaos.

“These recurring anomalies lead me to believe that the Poison Spur Mob is preparing for something significant—something very, very important. That’s why they remain patient and restrained.

“I can’t be certain whether their forthcoming actions will impact our Savoie Mob, but we cannot idly wait for answers.”

At least you’re astute… Lumian grudgingly commended Baron Brignais within his thoughts.

With a smile, Lumian posed a question, “Are you suggesting that I eliminate their key members and observe their reactions?

“If they endure it without retaliation, it signifies a considerably grave problem. We would need to instigate a full-blown conflict and compel them to expose the issue, wouldn’t we?”

Baron Brignais chuckled.

“I enjoy conversing with clever individuals.

“So, are you willing to undertake this task?”

Though his tone appeared inquisitive, his posture, gaze, and actions left no doubt that it was an order.

Should Lumian refuse, the Savoie Mob would withdraw its protection.

Lumian chuckled.

“I require information on all the significant members of the Poison Spur Mob—names, appearances, capabilities, distinguishing traits, and whether they have immediate family or spouses…”

Louis, who stood behind Baron Brignais, was taken aback.

Why is he asking about the family members of the Poison Spur Mob leaders? Is he planning to use them?

Among Trier’s mobs, an unspoken rule prevailed—one that everyone abided by unless it was an exceptional circumstance: never target family members who weren’t involved in the mob.

Most individuals had parents, spouses, and children. If they were to abandon all moral boundaries and kill without hesitation, none would be spared. Everyone would be in jeopardy.

Secondly, dealing with the families of low-ranking mobsters held no value. However, at Baron Brignais’s level, his family remained confidential, known to only a select few. Furthermore, they resided outside Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Thirdly, those who held a certain status within the mob could be deemed ruthless. Threatening them with their families would only ignite their fury.

Fourthly, the annihilation of a family would inevitably make headlines, angering the higher-ups at the police headquarters and triggering a severe crackdown.

Thus, it was only in the process of eliminating a faction that they would confront the family of an enemy leader, avoiding the sowing of seeds of animosity and serving as a deterrent to other mobs.

What was Ciel's intention inquiring about the immediate family and wife of a crucial member of the Poison Spur Mob?

Baron Brignais gazed at Lumian for a few moments before a slow smile crept across his face.

"The boss of the Poison Spur Mob is Roger, known as Black Scorpion. He resides at 126 Avenue du Marché. I'm uncertain if he has a wife or immediate family. Even if he does, they aren't in the market district. They might not even be in Trier.

"He possesses sinister spells and magical powers. Even I wouldn't dare to confront him."

Baron Brignais seized the opportunity to caution Lumian about the formidable strength of "Black Scorpion" Roger. It was wise to avoid any designs against him, for death would be the only outcome.

Sinister spells… A Beyonder focused on spellcasting? Considering Roger's ability to subdue Margot, he must be at least a Sequence 7. He might even possess a mystical artifact or Beyonder weapon… If Beyonders of this caliber lack robust bodies or special life-preserving abilities, they may resort to traps, close-range assassinations, and other methods. If their bodies aren't weak and they excel in close combat, or if they possess a substitution spell like Leah's paper figurine, I'll have hardly any chance of victory. Unless I employ the Luck Enhancement Spell to prearrange his misfortune and make him sufficiently unlucky… Lumian's thoughts raced like lightning, fleeting as they disappeared.

He nodded and inquired, "What about the others?"

Baron Brignais took a leisurely puff on his pipe before responding,"The Poison Spur Mob once had four powerful and significant members who were slightly inferior to us in the market district. However, after Margot's demise at your hands, his replacement, Wilson, is quite feeble. Their overall strength has greatly diminished.

"Roger's deputy, 'Baldy' Harman, is one of them. Initially, he and Roger arrived in the market district, establishing the Salle de Gristmill and gradually recruiting a group of individuals to form the Poison Spur Mob.

"He's highly skilled in combat, on par with Margot in that regard. Additionally, he possesses peculiar abilities. For instance, he can withstand a blade and only suffer minor injuries. At times, he exhibits sudden bursts of violence, as if under the influence of some drug. He can instill fear in others. Oh, and he wields a knife

coated with poison.

“He’s exceedingly cruel. He doesn’t have a family or a mistress, but he takes a keen interest in women. He often dallies with street girls under the Poison Spur Mob.

“His usual residence is ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger’s house. When he seeks the company of a woman, he opts for a relatively clean motel or hotel within the market district.”

Lumian listened attentively, gradually formulating a plan.

There’s a highly effective trap for ‘Baldy’ Harman.

Regardless of how Harman acquires such formidable defenses that only result in minor injuries after being slashed, it suggests a high probability that he’s willing to trade injuries for victory. He relies heavily on his strengths in this aspect.

If that’s the case, I can provide him an opportunity. However, Fallen Mercury will be the one to inflict those minor injuries upon him.

Even minor wounds can bleed!

Baron Brignais continued, “Most of the dancers under the Poison Spur Mob are under the supervision of Castina from Feynapotter. She was abducted to Trier and later became ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger’s mistress.

“‘Short-legged Candlestick’ was her nickname back when she worked as a dancer, owing to her relatively petite stature.”

Lumian envisioned a compact candlestick and formed a rough image of Castina in his mind.

“Castina doesn’t engage in frequent fights, but she exhibits remarkable combat skills when she does. She’s cold and merciless when dealing with disobedient dancers. Perhaps she’s forgotten the hardships she endured,” Baron Brignais remarked with a touch of gentlemanly courtesy. “She resides in an apartment at 19 Rue du Rossignol. We’re unsure of the specific floor or room she occupies. She often frequents Roger’s house.”

What right do you have to speak of her like that? Why don’t we discuss the person who became a singer at Salle de Bal Brise after her father was forced to die due to a debt? Lumian never believed that mobsters possessed a true conscience.

No matter the camaraderie, loyalty, or care they exhibited toward their peers, they were merely wildflowers adorned with mud. They essentially sought out victims among the dancers, street girls, ordinary individuals persecuted by loan sharks, and the peddlers they extorted.

Brignais proceeded to introduce the final leader of the Poison Spur Mob.

“‘Hammer’ Ait was originally a member of our Savoie Mob. He possessed courage, intellect, and a sturdy physique. I held him in high regard and planned to recommend him to the boss. However, he betrayed us and joined the Poison Spur Mob. He swiftly acquired Beyonder powers.

“I suspect he consumed a potion from the Warrior pathway and has already reached Sequence 8. His towering height, nearly 1.9 meters, and his conduct during conflicts lead me to this deduction.

“‘Hammer’ describes his fists, which possess the hardness and force of iron hammers. He typically fights unarmed, but he’s also adept with a revolver and a dirk.

“He resides at 25 Rue des Pavés, adjacent to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. There is a sizable contingent of Poison Spur Mob members in that area.”

Pugilist? Will Beyonder characteristics manifest upon his demise? Lumian nodded and queried Baron Brignais,

“I also require their approximate travel patterns. Additionally, provide me with a revolver, an ample supply of bullets, and a portable weapon. A dirk, dagger, bayonet, or axe will suffice.”

“No problem. I’ll have Louis deliver them to you tomorrow morning.” Baron Brignais nodded with satisfaction.

After observing Ciel depart from the café, Louis lowered his voice and inquired, “Baron, are we truly going to let him confront the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob?”

Baron Brignais chuckled.

“Didn’t you hear my explanation earlier? I didn’t deceive him about this.

“However, the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob are not easily dealt with. Whether he struggles and requires our aid and protection afterward, or if he fails and finds himself on the brink of death, we can crush his arrogance and make him obedient.”

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Chapter 165 - 165 Meeting Jenna Again

165 Meeting Jenna Again

Louis exclaimed in surprise, “What if Ciel fails and gets done in by the Poison Spur Mob?”

Baron Brignais chuckled and replied, “When has our Savoie Mob ever kept all its members?”

…

On the way back to Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian found himself in quite a good mood.

Initially, he had intended to apprehend a significant member of the Poison Spur Mob, probing into their source of power and their affiliation with the wicked deity Madame Pualis worshiped. But now, the Savoie Mob had assigned him a similar task. It aligned perfectly with his desires.

This way, he not only swiftly gained detailed information about multiple targets, saving valuable time, but he could also fully utilize the Savoie Mob’s resources, such as weaponry, manpower, and connections.

A moment ago, Lumian contemplated requesting explosives from Baron Brignais, mulling over the possibility of setting a trap to blow up one of the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob.

In the end, he decided against it. Firstly, he felt it was too brazen and would attract unwanted attention from the police. Secondly, being a wanted criminal, he couldn’t afford to be investigated. Thirdly, if he obliterated his target entirely, how could he gather any information?

Of course, he could employ the Summoning Dance and the wall of spirituality to allow the deceased spirit to cling to him and enhance the memories that left the deepest imprints. However, this method was entirely unpredictable. Who knew if those individuals’ minds would be as deranged as the previous pervert’s? Moreover, each Summoning Dance could only amplify a single memory. If luck wasn’t on his side, it could take a significant amount of time to find useful information. This contradicted his intention of swiftly departing from the scene of the assassination.

Initially, Lumian planned to deal with “Hammer” Ait, but upon hearing Baron Brignais’s description, he considered “Baldy” Harman as a viable candidate as well.

Compared to Ait, Harman had notable “weaknesses” that Hunters could exploit to set traps!

His power granted him exceptional body resilience. On numerous occasions, he sustained only minor injuries despite being slashed with knives.

Lumian recalled Aurore’s words: “Those skilled in swimming are prone to drowning.”

In Harman’s case, one could interpret it as, “Those adept at blocking weapons with their bodies are more susceptible to perishing by weapons.” As for Lumian, he possessed Fallen Mercury, the Cursed Blade.

Furthermore, in comparison to “Hammer” Ait, who frequently traveled with a large entourage and resided within the Poison Spur Mob’s settlement, “Baldy” Harman ventured out alone occasionally, seeking street girls and dancers. Consequently, he proved to be a simpler target for assassination. Moreover, he was closer to the core power of the Poison Spur Mob and held more secrets.

However, the conundrum arose. If Lumian were to set a trap and employ Fallen Mercury to deal with “Baldy” Harman, capturing him alive and extracting information would be impossible.

If Lumian could overpower “Baldy” Harman after stabbing him and dragging him to a secluded corner in Underground Trier, why bother stabbing him initially?

If he couldn’t, his only recourse would be to stab the enemy and allow him to flee. Alternatively, after his escape, Lumian could await the intervention of the Montsouris ghost to “assist” in the target’s demise.

Whether this would implicate the target’s family wasn’t his concern.

Hence, the pursuit of “Baldy” Harman and “Hammer” Ait presented their respective pros and cons. Lumian was not yet able to reach a decision.

He intended to contemplate his target selection after receiving more detailed information, weapons, and ammunition from Baron Brignais the following morning.

“What’s all this?” Lumian inquired curiously as he traversed the lobby.

Weren’t these the same elderly folks peddling counterfeit street ma?tresse d’atelier photos at Suhit steam locomotive station? Why were they bringing back such a sizable bag?

Ruhr ceased pulling at the cloth bag, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He forced a smile and replied, “Don’t you know, Monsieur Ciel? We moonlight as scavengers by night. We salvage discarded items that might still hold value.”

Informed by Charlie’s “advertisement,” the couple was aware of Ciel’s newfound leadership role in the Savoie Mob. Consequently, they saw no issue with Ciel seeking answers from them since Auberge du Coq Doré was his turf.

From their perspective, as the guardian of Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ciel needed to stay informed about the establishment to prevent any mishaps.

Juggling two occupations, one of which involves deception… It certainly reeks of all sorts of rubbish… Lumian pinched his nose and silently muttered. He pondered and asked thoughtfully, “Do you hoard all this trash in your room?”

Ruhr wore an ingratiating smile and confirmed, “Indeed. We visit the waste disposal site every few days. People drop off various items there. Heh heh, while scavengers are filthy, without us, Trier would be overwhelmed by foul odors. Every nook and cranny would be brimming with refuse.”

In Trier, scavengers served as supplementary cleaners.

No wonder there’s a stench in the room. No wonder you perpetually reek and forgo bathing… As Lumian ascended the stairs at a leisurely pace, he stole a glance at the wrinkled faces and slightly stooped postures of Ruhr and Michel. He casually inquired, “You’re not young anymore. Why do you still toil so diligently for money?”

Ruhr and Michel were taken aback, their smiles faltering subtly.

After a brief pause, Ruhr mustered a pained and helpless smile.

“It is precisely because we are old that we must labor so strenuously.

“We arrived in Trier when we were very young and took up various occupations. We had a child, but he did not survive to adulthood. The monthly wages we received merely sustained our survival. As our health began to decline and our strength waned, fear gripped us. We were uncertain of what the future held.

“What if we grow too old to engage in our usual work someday? What would we do? Deplete our meager savings within a few months and rely on the charitable acts of the Church and the government to eke out a meager existence until we perish from hunger?

“I-I do not wish for such a fate…”

Lumian was suddenly reminded of something his sister had once uttered. “Intis is exceedingly harsh now. There is no protection for hardworking individuals in their twilight years.”

Stirred by his thoughts, Ruhr continued, “Thankfully, our appetites have diminished with age. We don’t eat or sleep much. That leaves us with more time to earn money. We don’t have to worry about anything else. We can save most of what we earn.

“In the coming years, we should be able to enjoy a few more good ones by relying on our savings…

“Heh heh, truth be told, compared to most people, we’re considered fortunate. None of them made it to our age.”

Madame Michel, standing beside him, wore a wistful expression.

“Once we’ve saved enough, we’ll return to Aurmir and purchase a plot of land to cultivate grapes. Even if we lack the strength in the future, we can hire assistance. We don’t have extravagant expenses anyway.”

Aurmir stood as the provincial capital of Champagne Province, renowned as the foremost hub of wine production in the Northern Continent.

Silently, Lumian nodded as he observed the elderly couple laboriously hauling the bag of trash upstairs.

After a brief respite, he put on simple makeup and changed his attire. Clad in a linen shirt, brown overalls, loafers, and a dark bowler hat, he made his way straight to Salle de Gristmill.

Since “Hammer” Ait remained one of his targets, he needed to personally observe him.

It was the late hours of the night, and Salle de Gristmill buzzed with activity. Amid the pulsating music, men and women gyrated on the dance floor, releasing their frustrations.

Concerned about being recognized by the Poison Spur Mob, Lumian approached the bar and ordered a glass of rye beer before making his way to the dance floor. As he swayed to the rhythm, he surveyed his surroundings.

Before long, he spotted “Little Minx” Jenna appearing on the raised wooden platform in front of him.

She wore a similar outfit to the one she had donned in the afternoon, a short white blouse and a flouncy skirt, showcasing her fair chest.

This time, she sported a mole on the bridge of her nose.

It signified audacity.

Impressive mental strength she possesses. Despite the afternoon’s events, she’s back at work in the evening… Lumian couldn’t help but marvel.

In his opinion, since Jenna was “Red Boots” Franca’s lover, there was no need for her to be so committed.

The rhythmic drumbeats halted, and all eyes on the dance floor turned to Jenna, panting.

Jenna began with a high-pitched tone.

“Ernest, stay away from my wife and pipe!”

Laughter erupted from the crowd as if a collective realization had struck them.

In sync with the cheerful and bawdy singing, they swayed their bodies gently.

As Jenna sang, she executed high kicks, shifting her position and winking at the audience from different angles, even performing an exaggerated split.

During this display, her gaze briefly crossed paths with Lumian. She appeared momentarily stunned before returning to her normal demeanor.

Once she finished her song, the intense drumbeats resumed. Jenna wasted no time resting. She leaped onto the dance floor, navigating through the sudden eruption of cheers, whistles, and men vying for proximity. She approached Lumian and shouted with a playful smile, “Handsome lion, dance!”

In Intis, the lion was often used to describe alluring men due to their radiant mane, akin to the sun.

Lumian sensed that Jenna had something important to share. He set aside his beer and joined her on the dance floor, engaging in a lively dance with the Showy Diva, face-to-face.

Just as they were about to embrace, Jenna threw herself into Lumian’s arms and whispered into his ear, “You’re quite the talented dancer. By the way, I’ve discovered the identity of that pervert. His name is Hedsey. He used to reside in Room 504 at Auberge du Coq Doré.”

Charlie’s room? The occupant of Room 504 who put up Susanna Mattise’s portrait? Lumian was taken aback.

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Chapter 166 - 166 In Return

166 In Return

Lumian had always believed that the tenant, like Charlie, had been enchanted by Susanna Mattise in his dreams. His vitality had been gradually drained, until he met a sudden demise in the room. Monsieur Ive, the hotel owner, had secretly transported the lifeless body to a secluded spot in Underground Trier. Little did he expect that the tenant would transform into a pervert with Beyonder powers. He now roamed Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, preying on attractive women.

Lumian was convinced that Hedsey's newfound abilities stemmed from a boon granted due to the absence of Beyonder characteristics after death. It was clear that these powers originated from the same source as Susanna Mattise and Monsieur Ive.

In essence, not long after Susanna Mattise's portrait was plastered, something extraordinary had occurred to Hedsey. He had become a devout follower of the Mother Tree of Desire and received two to three boons within a few short months. As a result, he had gained significant strength and mastery over various mystical techniques.

For Beyonders who progressed by consuming potions, such speed was unimaginable, unless they possessed profound understanding and were at a remarkably low level.

However, Hedsey's boons also came with a downside. The recipient would be influenced by the power and gradually deviate from their true self. In certain aspects, they would become increasingly extreme, often engaging in actions that seemed irrational to ordinary individuals and inviting disaster upon themselves.

Both Monsieur Ive's miserliness and Hedsey's insatiable lust for women fell into this category.

Lumian suspected that nearly all boons had similar repercussions to some extent. Over time, they would inexorably draw the recipient closer to the bestower and induce corresponding mutations.

The reason Lumian remained unaffected by the powers of the Dancer and Alms Monk was that they didn't directly come from the hidden entity known as Inevitability, but rather the corruption within his body that had been filtered through the seal. Additionally, Lumian had always maintained a vigilant stance in such matters. He not only refrained from altering his style and way of life to exploit the traits of the Dancer and Alms Monk for greater control over his strength but at times even went against their influence.

Furthermore, Lumian would advance in Sequence and have a preliminarily digestion before obtaining the corresponding boon. He sought to preserve the balance of power within his body.

Lowering his head, Lumian whispered to Jenna in a hushed voice, “How did you discover this?”

As Jenna swayed to the rhythm, she pursed her lips and replied, “It’s quite evident that the pervert cannot exist without women. Kidnapping a woman every day and dragging her underground simply isn’t feasible, or else he would have been apprehended long ago. Damn it, there must have been several victims. Do those incompetent black-skinned dogs even notice?

“Then how does he usually solve his problem? Clearly, relying on himself isn’t sufficient to satiate his desires. So, I enlisted Franca’s help and inquired with the dancers and street girls from the Savoie Mob. I swiftly obtained an answer.”

“How can that pervert, who deserves to be f*cked by a donkey, possess such virility? He can perform multiple times a day!”

“Why doesn’t he pursue those wealthy old ladies? Both parties would be satisfied!”

Jenna recounted her investigation with a sense of pride, showcasing her intellect.

Throughout the afternoon, she had been brooding over Lumian’s earlier prank, which had made her appear foolish.

Before embracing the beliefs of the Mother Tree of Desire and receiving the boon, Hedsey was a regular visitor to Rue de la Muraille, Rue de Breda, and Rue du Rossignol. However, after obtaining the boon, his mind became consumed with thoughts of women… Lumian couldn’t help but acknowledge that Jenna occasionally demonstrated some intelligence.

With that in mind, Lumian decided to share some information.

“That abnormal desire must be a result of his Beyonder powers’ influence.”

“Beyonder powers…” Jenna glanced up at Lumian.

She had expected him to feign ignorance, just as they did in Underground Trier, where neither side openly acknowledged Hedsey’s displayed Beyonder powers. To her surprise, he spoke candidly.

After a brief pause, Jenna, who was dancing closely with Lumian, whispered in confusion, “Why do Beyonder powers make him so perverse?”

Lumian smirked once again. “It’s an abnormal Beyonder power.”

“Do you think I can’t tell that it’s abnormal?” Jenna grew infuriated once more.

Lumian chuckled.

“As for why it’s abnormal, go back and ask Franca. If Franca doesn’t know either, have her inquire with the Boss.”

He shared this information with Jenna because he was concerned that there might be more to the issues surrounding Monsieur Ive, Susanna Mattise, Hedsey, and the others.

If the official Beyonders failed to uncover the truth, his only hope lay with Mr. K’s finger and the Beyonders associated with the Savoie Mob.

Jenna snorted and dropped the matter. She refocused on dancing with Lumian.

As the music neared its end, she suddenly reached out and touched Lumian’s chest.

“Haha, nice bod!” Jenna grinned, then retreated, heading towards the half-height wooden platform in front of the dance floor.

It seemed as though she had finally exacted her revenge for what had transpired underground. She was filled with elation.

Lumian scoffed and left the dance floor, once again picking up his glass of rye beer.

As he listened to the music, he swayed his body gently, all the while observing the situation within Salle de Gristmill.

As Lumian surveyed the area, his attention was drawn to a group of mobsters congregating near the stage. They wore a mishmash of outfits, surrounding a towering man who stood at a staggering height of nearly 1.9 meters.

The burly man bore a striking resemblance to “Giant” Simon. His black shirt and formal attire emphasized his bulging muscles, but the dark-blue canvas pants and strapless black leather boots seemed out of place, creating a peculiar ensemble.

With his tousled brown hair and slightly set-apart brown eyes, his ordinary facial features were complemented by a chiseled jawline. His hands and legs were longer than those of an average person.

“Hammer” Ait… Lumian averted his gaze, suspecting that this man was one of his targets.

In Trier, there weren’t many individuals towering at nearly 1.9 meters

Lumian wasn’t concerned about “Hammer” Ait and his subordinates recognizing him from this distance. The ballroom was dimly lit, with only the soft glow of gas wall lamps and a chandelier above, providing enough illumination for dancing and discreet conversations. Unless someone was intimately familiar with Lumian or

had just seen him, they wouldn't be able to identify him.

Furthermore, Lumian had taken precautions to disguise himself. He hadn't anticipated Jenna recognizing him at first glance either.

After Jenna finished singing another song, "Hammer" Ait led his subordinates off the dance floor and ascended to the second floor.

Lumian continued his observations when he suddenly spotted a familiar figure entering the room.

It was Monsieur Ive, the proprietor of Auberge du Coq Doré, his attire slightly faded from washing.

His anxious and worried expression was evident as his blue eyes scanned the surroundings.

Is he searching for Hedsey? The pervert didn't return after leaving in the afternoon. They suspect something happened to him, so they're scouring the dance halls, seeking clues with the street girls? Lumian withdrew his gaze thoughtfully and shifted his attention back to the dancers on the floor.

Based on the characteristics exhibited by Hedsey's Spirit Body, Lumian sensed that Monsieur Ive was much weaker in comparison. He likely possessed the power of a Sequence 9 boon, focused on greed, possibly with elements of appetite.

As for Hedsey, he was likely on the level of Sequence 8, with a slim chance of being a Sequence 7. Lumian leaned more towards the former, as the few Sequence 7 individuals he had encountered before were formidable adversaries, difficult to overcome even with preparations and traps.

Of course, had Lumian not carefully observed and realized that Hedsey had the ability to trigger others' desires, he might have been swiftly dealt with.

In that environment, without Jenna's presence, Lumian would have relied on his own strength to resist the influence and not completely forget the existence of the enemy. With Showy Diva, it was challenging for him to restrain himself. He had to rely on pain to awaken his senses.

From the corner of his eye, Lumian observed Monsieur Ive engaging in conversation with the part-time street girl dancers. The way they scolded him, wearing expressions of disdain, struck Lumian as amusing.

Is he pretending to negotiate a price in order to gather information about Hedsey's whereabouts?

In the end, he's just too stingy, always bargaining down the other party's offer by half or more, resulting in their scolding?

Heh heh, Charlie was worried that Monsieur Ive, an old widower, wouldn't be willing to spend money on a licensed prostitute and risk contracting a disease. It

seems he's overthinking it. Monsieur Ive can't even bring himself to spend money on an unlicensed street girl!

The negative effects of a boon are truly potent…

Hmm, if there are women in that group who possess the same boons as Hedsey and are on the same level, they should be in a constant state of hunger and thirst. Monsieur Ive wouldn't need to seek out another street girl. Heh heh, he would only end up despising himself for being a man. He would be on the verge of being drained dry, with his desires forcibly aroused.

The best disguises for those women would be dancers and street girls?

Something doesn't add up. If there really were such women, Hedsey wouldn't need to come out and harm others… Could it be that everyone at this level has advanced or died, with no replacements? Or is there an imbalance in the number of men and women? Is Hedsey the one being ostracized?

As Lumian contemplated these thoughts, the band struck up another lively dance tune.

After finishing her song, Jenna leaped off the half-height wooden stage once again and approached Lumian, inviting him to dance.

This elicited boos from the surrounding crowd.

Knowing that Jenna had something else to say, Lumian deliberately maneuvered to provoke those who were jeering.

He stepped onto the dance floor, drew closer to Jenna, and began swaying his hips.

Jenna looked up at him, smiling, and asked, "What brings a Savoie mobster like you to the Salle de Gristmill?"

Lumian clicked his tongue and chuckled.

"Don't you think I'm fond of you? Of course, I'm here to listen to your singing."

Jenna scoffed.

"Your target is 'Hammer' Ait, isn't it? You want to repeat what happened with Margot?"

"You're quite clever," Lumian praised in a taunting tone.

Jenna smirked confidently. "I can assist you and provide important information."

Lumian suppressed his nonchalance and asked thoughtfully, "What do you desire in return?"

Jenna snorted and cursed, "Are you f*cking underestimating me?

“Although I didn’t thank you this afternoon, I won’t forget that you saved me. Coincidentally, I’m familiar with all the dance halls in the market district. Moreover, I just had a chat with Ait about some matters after the performance. I should be able to help you.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, she gritted her teeth and continued, “‘Hammer’ resides in the innermost room on the second floor, towards Auberge du Coq Doré. He has ten thugs by his side. Four stationed at the door—two inside and two outside. Two by the window, two near the sofa, and two always behind him. They’re all armed.

“The security wasn’t this tight before, and there weren’t as many people. It’s all because of what you did to Margot.

“That room has an attached washroom. It’s currently unoccupied. If the window is fully opened, it can just about accommodate a person.

“From the ventilation pipe in the ballroom kitchen, you can climb up to the second floor and bypass the guards stationed at the stairs. Then, enter the adjacent room and leap from the windowsill onto a narrow ledge outside the washroom. It requires considerable skill to pull off successfully.”

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Chapter 167 - 167 Convergence

167 Convergence

Upon hearing Jenna's account, Lumian instinctively twirled and spun, his surprise evident as he asked, "How do you know all this?"

It made sense that Jenna would have a basic understanding of the room layout and the thugs' positions after venturing to the second-floor room and conferring with "Hammer" Ait. However, how did she know about the ventilation pipe in the ballroom kitchen leading to the second floor? Or jumping from the neighboring windowsill to the washroom? And what about the ledge on the outer wall of that specific room? Were these details within the grasp of an underground singer, known for her bawdy songs and exaggerated performances?

She shouldn't possess such knowledge!

Jenna, her face adorned with black eye shadow and a fake mole, sported a smug expression.

"Don't fret about how I know. I avoid seeing what I shouldn't, hearing what I shouldn't, and asking questions I shouldn't," she retorted, cleverly turning Lumian's words back on him.

This brought her considerable satisfaction.

Only those planning an assassination or devising an escape in dire circumstances would pay attention to such particulars and observe with a purpose… Which category does Jenna fall into? Her powers of observation in this environment are nearly on par with a Hunter's. Sequences leaning toward assassination required gathering environmental information. Assassination… Lumian's mind raced, concocting a plan to bluff Jenna.

Grinning mischievously, he uttered, "So you're an Assassin."

He stressed the word "Assassin."

Jenna's expression changed, her smile freezing.

"How did you figure it out?" she blurted out, shocked.

"By using my brain," Lumian replied, his smile unwavering.

There were still a few Sequences that excelled at environmental observation. Lumian had taken a bold guess, considering Jenna as an Assassin. He recalled

Ryan and his companions mentioning that Demoness was a relatively common pathway in the central and northern regions of Intis, especially Trier. In any case, he had nothing to lose if he was wrong.

Meanwhile, Lumian pondered to himself, Not long after arriving in Trier, I encountered an Assassin and came to her aid. Can this be seen as a manifestation of the convergence of Beyonder characteristics?

Jenna can't have reached Sequence 7; she isn't a Witch. Otherwise, even if weakened by the sedative on the paper, she could have effortlessly overpowered Hedsey with her mystical abilities. The term Witch clearly indicates proficiency in spells and curses, as Aurore's notebook had mentioned.

She is unlikely to be a Sequence 8 Instigator. How could an Instigator be fooled by me repeatedly?

But it isn't out of the question. Perhaps Jenna had been more foolish in the past and relied on the Instigator path to enhance her intelligence? Furthermore, her willingness to provide information on "Hammer" Ait could be interpreted as a form of instigation.

Heh heh, Jenna is a woman, so there's no need to worry about her gender changing after consuming the Witch potion.

Where had Jenna obtained the potion? Had Franca given it to her? Could Franca also be a Beyonder following the Demoness pathway?

If Franca is only a Sequence 8, that would be fine. But what if she were a Sequence 7 Witch? Who knows if Franca had been male or female before? Well, her behavior towards women is certainly peculiar. She is in a romantic relationship with Jenna. Hmm…

Jenna quietly contemplated her recent words, but she didn't uncover any information that might have revealed her own Sequence.

"Although you can fight, I believe there's a high chance you'll be killed on the spot if you engage him in a place like the washroom, which isn't spacious enough."

"Madame, are you persuading me or taunting me? It seems you still possess some potential as an Instigator," Lumian candidly voiced his thoughts, not holding back his criticisms.

He realized that Franca knew "Hammer" Ait better than Baron Brignais. She had mentioned a crucial point that the latter had omitted.

Setting aside the possibility that Franca had a personal grudge against "Hammer" Ait, Franca either had a formidable background or had earned the trust of the boss of the Savoie Mob, gaining access to more mysticism knowledge and Sequence information than Baron Brignais.

Jenna was taken aback. “You know about Instigators?”

Is this still a country bumpkin from the countryside? How does he possess such extensive knowledge about the Beyonder pathways?

Franca had mentioned that he’s wanted by the authorities. It seemed he had been involved in a Beyonder incident?

“I know more than you think,” Lumian replied, smiling.

As he spoke, he suddenly recalled a title that had recently belonged to him: “Mysticism Illiterate.”

Lumian swiftly pushed aside his melancholy and earnestly considered Jenna’s warning.

Indeed, while Hunters were also skilled in combat and killing as Sequences, if traps and abilities like Provocation were excluded, they still couldn’t match the prowess of Pugilists in close combat. Especially in a confined and cramped environment, they couldn’t employ their combat intelligence effectively. It would be difficult for them to achieve the feat of the weak defeating the strong.

Taking into account the modifications to his Dancer abilities and the utilization of various unorthodox tactics, Lumian felt he could just about hold his ground. He wouldn’t fail immediately. If he wanted to eliminate “Hammer” Ait, he could only rely on Fallen Mercury and escape after a successful strike.

But what set this apart from killing “Baldy” Harman? There was no need to factor in the presence of ten thugs and ten revolvers.

Lumian assessed his possessions to see if anything could be useful in such a battle.

Over 1,700 verl d’or… Fallen Mercury… Blood from the aquatic monster… Poisonous scales from the aquatic monster… A vial of the sedative that rendered Jenna powerless… A bottle of stimulating gas to counteract the effects of the sedative… A bottle of liquid with unknown properties… A dagger left behind by that pervert… A ritual silver dagger… Several white bandages…

As he contemplated, a plan gradually took shape.

As he swayed to the rhythm, he cast a sidelong glance at Jenna and posed his question.

“Is that washroom spacious?”

Jenna made confirmation. “No, it’s not. Besides the bathtub, toilet, and sink, it can only accommodate four to five people.”

In other words, if Lumian and “Hammer” Ait engaged in close combat, there wouldn’t be room for anyone else.

“Is there a curtain outside the bathtub?” Lumian inquired further.

“Yes,” Jenna pondered for a moment. “Do you have a gun with you? I believe it would be better to use a gun. It’s safer and gives you a higher chance of success.”

“I don’t,” Lumian replied, shaking his head.

Jenna sneered, “You intend to carry out the plan tonight with just that?”

She paused briefly before continuing, “If you truly wish to kill ‘Hammer’ Ait tonight, I can lend you my revolver.”

“You still have a revolver on you?” Lumian was surprised this time.

He hadn’t suspected that Jenna had a concealed revolver.

The Showy Diva wore a short white blouse with a wide collar that allowed her bra to peek out. Her beige fluffy short skirt and black boots that didn’t reach her knees added to her attire. Moreover, she kept raising her legs as she danced. It seemed impossible for her to have a gun holster strapped to her inner thigh.

Lumian speculated that the only possible place for her to hide the revolver was within her pair of boots.

Jenna assumed Ciel was questioning why she carried a revolver, so she responded with a disdainful sigh.

“I perform in dance halls in places like the market district. Do you think all those monsters are upstanding citizens? Do you think they won’t act impulsively and try something on me? Those pieces of filth have twisted minds all day. When their thoughts are controlled by their desires, they won’t consider that I have a connection with Franca and a good relationship with her. Damn it, if deterrence always worked, there wouldn’t be so many criminals!”

While speaking, Jenna followed the rhythm of the drums and crouched down, searching inside her boots.

Swiftly standing up, she pressed herself against Lumian. Twisting her body, she slipped her hand into his naturally lowered and swaying palm.

Lumian immediately felt the cold metal texture and the solid wood.

Without missing a beat, Lumian withdrew his hand and discreetly tucked the gun into his pocket.

Afterward, Jenna continued, “I bought it with most of my savings when I first arrived in the market district, before meeting Franca. That blasted black market merchant even tried to bed me, but I kicked his shin, making him scream in pain.”

Carrying a gun for self-defense at all times… You're quite vigilant. Otherwise, those mobsters could have controlled you before meeting Franca. You might have even become a part-time dancer or a street girl… Lumian replied with a smile, "Well done!"

As the accompanying music reached its end, Jenna fell silent.

With the drumbeats fading away, Lumian observed Jenna as she walked toward the stage. He left the dance floor and returned to the outer circle.

Taking advantage of the opportunity to visit the washroom, he carefully examined and familiarized himself with the revolver Jenna had given him.

It was a compact revolver with a short barrel, ideal for concealed carry.

Its color was a dark iron-black, and the grip was crafted from walnut wood. It held a total of six bullets.

After tinkering with the revolver for a while, Lumian realized a predicament.

His shooting experience was lacking. Previously, he had primarily relied on the shotgun's wide spray of pellets.

Oh well. I don't expect to kill Hammer Ait with a single shot. Injuring and weakening him will suffice. At such close range, with my grip and some shooting experience, I can't miss by much…

In an environment like the washroom, there's only one opportunity for a shot. "Hammer" Ait won't provide me with a chance for a second shot… Lumian swiftly made up his mind.

Exiting the washroom, he headed toward the kitchen of the Salle de Gristmill, taking advantage of the absence of people in the vicinity.

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Chapter 168 - 168 Prayer Target

168 Prayer Target

As Lumian made his way, his nimbleness served him well in evading servers bustling with trays of food and busboys returning used utensils.

He pressed forward until he reached the kitchen, only to find it in complete disarray.

Stacks of unwashed utensils lay haphazardly in the sink, coated in layers of greasy oil. Two dishwashing maids stood by, tirelessly scrubbing away at the never-ending pile of dishes.

The stoves emitted fierce yellow flames, turning the small space into a sweltering inferno. Sweat poured down everyone's faces as they toiled away.

Three chefs, adorned in white aprons, each prepared their own dishes. They would occasionally taste their concoctions by dipping their fingers in the sauces or sampling a morsel, wiping their hands casually on their aprons before moving on to the next dish.

Once the chefs approved, the servers would whisk the plates away, oblivious to the fact that their thumbs often grazed the food and thick soups. They paid no mind to it whatsoever.

The kitchen helpers scurried around the chefs, chopping vegetables, handling fish, tidying up ingredients, taking out the trash, and fetching various seasonings and supplies. They never ceased their efforts, yet the kitchen remained in disarray. Vegetable leaves, fish scales, and fruit peels were strewn about, oily and scattered across the floor, near the stoves, and close to the sink.

The clamor of the chefs and kitchen helpers filled the air with shouts and curses, creating a chaotic symphony.

Lumian could easily mistake it for a battlefield if he closed his eyes and listened closely.

Taking advantage of the chaotic scene, Lumian deftly navigated through the busy crowd and reached the cabinet brimming with ingredients. Using partitions, handles, and the grayish-white gas and water pipes, he skillfully ascended to the ceiling and slipped into the ventilation shaft.

The overpowering smell of oil and smoke assailed Lumian's senses, nearly overwhelming him.

But with the tolerance of an Alms Monk toward extreme environments, he pushed himself forward, crawling through the ventilation shaft and occasionally climbing higher.

After about ten seconds, he poked his head out from above a second-floor washroom.

Ensuring the coast was clear, Lumian agilely leaped down and swiftly made his way to the door, carefully scanning both ends of the corridor in secrecy.

The area was eerily silent, with only two henchmen guarding the stairs, their focus solely on the first floor. They paid no mind to what lay behind them.

Relieved, Lumian let out a sigh and pinpointed his target. Crouching down, he leaped to the adjacent room.

Although the door was locked, Lumian encountered no obstacle he couldn't overcome. Utilizing a half-broken wire he had brought along, he managed to pry open the wooden door after a few attempts.

Just as Jenna had described, the washroom attached to "Hammer" Ait's room lacked a protruding window sill. It only had a decorative ledge, barely providing enough space to stand on its side.

Even for a Hunter, leaping from the window sill to the narrow ledge posed a significant challenge, demanding perfect balance.

Fortunately, Lumian possessed the extraordinary flexibility of a Dancer, almost surpassing human limits.

After careful observation, he jumped up and landed precisely on the ledge with his right foot. His left side wavered, threatening to tip him over.

Squatting down, he revealed only half of his head, peering silently into the room.

The washroom door stood ajar, and occasional mobsters passed by.

Lumian exercised patience, studying their movements until he discerned a pattern. Seizing the opportune gap when the washroom door was momentarily unattended, he skillfully pried open the window using Hedsey's dagger and clambered inside.

Maintaining composure and confidence, he swiftly closed the glass window before hurrying to the space beneath the bathtub, concealing himself with the undrawn curtains.

Lumian, having successfully infiltrated the premises, arranged his few essential items in easily accessible positions. He took a moment to double-check their locations, ensuring he wouldn't fumble in a state of panic.

Standing there motionless, he strained his ears to catch the activities in the adjacent room.

“Hammer” Ait occasionally inquired about their recent earnings to the dance hall manager, scolded his subordinates with anger, or engaged in flirtatious exchanges with the star dancer, accompanied by seemingly intimate gestures.

After a while, when the dance hall manager and the star dancer departed, Ait seemed to rise from his seat and began pacing slowly.

He addressed the mobsters in the room, saying, “In the following days, send out all your boys and have them ‘visit’ every individual within our territory. I want you to ensure that we know who can be elected as the market district’s member of parliament in next week’s election!”

Oh, so your mob is meddling in the parliamentary elections? Lumian felt a mixture of surprise and lack thereof.

The growth of Trier’s mobs was impossible without some form of backing. They either maintained favorable relations with the police department and influential figures within it, enjoyed protection from powerful political figures, or acted as the black-gloved enforcers for influential merchants. The latter undoubtedly had connections to high-ranking government officials, upper echelons of the Churches, and military generals.

Lumian had never anticipated that the mastermind behind the Poison Spur Mob possessed the audacity to vie for a parliamentary seat. He had initially assumed their ambitions would extend no further than becoming the market district’s police commissioner or a member of the Trier City Council.

Intis functioned as a parliamentary republic, where members of parliament represented various constituencies and formed the National Convention. This Convention held the authority to appoint the president, prime minister, who in turn appointed ministers—although their decisions required approval from the Convention.

The National Convention also possessed the power to legislate, declare war, and determine the government’s budget. Each member of parliament held considerable influence and authority.

At present, the National Convention consisted of over 300 individuals, with one-tenth of them being former nobles. The Sauron family, once part of the royal lineage, served as their leaders. The remaining seats were allocated based on the economic status of different provinces and territories, particularly the prosperous Trier Greater Region.

Trier, whether in terms of population or economic prowess, stood unrivaled in Intis and the Greater Trier Region. It held nearly 40 seats in the National Convention.

These approximately 40 seats were distributed among 20 districts, accommodating as few as one member of parliament or as many as four to five. These representatives also held ex officio positions as councilors in the City Council.

The Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, a relatively small constituency, possessed only one seat in the National Convention. The individual chosen to fill this seat would wield immense power and influence within the region.

Currently, the ruling National Party, the popular Enlightenment Party, and the Revolutionary Party, seeking to address existing flaws, were vigorously preparing for the upcoming National Convention elections.

The party that secured a simple majority in the Convention would become the new ruling party. Otherwise, they would have to negotiate, compromise, and form a coalition with another party.

In addition to the National Party, the Enlightenment Party, and the Revolutionary Party, Intis also had the Emperor Party (restorationists who advocated Roselle's rule) and the Carbonari. They voiced discontentment with the current system and sought to bring about change through force.

The mobsters replied one after another, assuring "Hammer" Ait that nothing would go awry.

However, they remained tight-lipped about which faction or candidate they supported, leaving Lumian feeling a sense of disappointment.

Tell me!

After briefing them on the election, "Hammer" Ait instructed his subordinates, saying, "Leave for a while. Return only when I summon you."

What is his plan? Lumian's eavesdropping had taken him by surprise.

Soon enough, the mobsters vacated the room, leaving "Hammer" Ait alone.

Lumian refrained from taking immediate action. After careful analysis, he believed that the confrontation between him and Hammer Ait in the washroom would have a more targeted impact than engaging outside, even without resorting to the use of Fallen Mercury.

The room beyond fell into an eerie silence. Lumian strained his ears and managed to catch faint voices.

It seemed like "Hammer" Ait was muttering to himself, "Protector of Evil People… The Lady who Births Deities…"

The Lady who Births Deities? That sounds impressive… Is Ait praying to some secret entity? There are about four or five sentences, and it's more of a description? It deviates from the usual three-stanza template… Lumian made a

rough guess at what “Hammer” Ait was up to.

As for whom he was praying to, Lumian couldn’t even begin to speculate based on the fragmented description he barely heard.

It lay beyond the scope of his current knowledge in mysticism.

Lumian felt a vague sense of malevolence emanating from the room outside.

Indeed, it was as if the room itself had turned wicked.

Holding his breath, Lumian composed himself, refraining from listening to the turmoil outside.

After a while, the sinister atmosphere dissipated, and everything returned to normal.

Lumian let out a slow exhale, heating up his palm.

At that moment, “Hammer” Ait summoned his subordinates, who had previously left the room, to return.

Lumian continued to bide his time.

Seconds turned into minutes until finally, he heard the heaviest footsteps approaching the washroom.

They belonged to “Hammer” Ait. Lumian had already distinguished their sound.

Swiftly, he retrieved a metal canister marked with a symbol.

Unscrewing the cap, he inserted a thin, pre-kneaded paper ball into the bottle.

Seconds before the footsteps drew near the washroom, Lumian retrieved the paper ball and twisted the cap shut.

He then tore the paper ball in two and inserted each piece into his nostrils.

The stench, reminiscent of fermented excrement, assaulted Lumian’s senses, nearly bringing him to tears. His right hand instinctively moved to remove the thin paper ball.

With great resolve and the endurance of an Alms Monk accustomed to extreme environments, Lumian exercised control. His expression contorted, and his muscles twitched ever so slightly as he stood there, retrieving another metal canister filled mostly with gas. He unscrewed its cap.

Clang!

“Hammer” Ait shut the washroom door and approached the toilet bowl.

The space now became partially enclosed. Only the gaps between the door and windows allowed a hint of fresh air to seep in.

Yes, a gruesome encounter awaits him… Lumian observed the fluctuations in his target's luck, silently tossing the open metal canister into the air, allowing the colorless and odorless gas within to disperse and fill the washroom.

This was the sedative concocted by the perverted Hedsey. Even catching a whiff of it at close range could severely weaken an Assassin's strength!

It was ideal for a confined, partially enclosed space like the washroom.

This was the trap Lumian had set for "Hammer" Ait!

Of course, it would take some time for the gas to spread throughout the washroom and take effect to a certain extent. After all, Lumian himself wasn't breathing it in at close proximity.

What Lumian needed to do next was to prevent "Hammer" Ait from leaving the washroom or allow anyone outside to open the door.

He placed the open metal canister by the edge of the bathtub and retrieved Jenna's revolver, aiming it at the toilet bowl through the curtain.

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Chapter 169 - 169 Battle in the Room

169 Battle in the Room

The rush of water persisted, and Lumian grew anxious, fearing that “Hammer” Ait might sense danger. He needed to calculate the height just right before pulling the trigger.

Bang!

The bullet tore through the drapes, leaving behind searing scorch marks.

“Hammer” Ait’s hair stood on end before any of this happened. He paid no mind to the fact that he was mid-stream and promptly collapsed to the side.

Yellowish liquid splattered in all directions. The bullet grazed Ait’s arm, striking the wall and narrowly missing Lumian on the rebound.

Lumian’s revolver flew from his grip after a missed shot. He seized the edges of the curtain, yanked it off, and used it to ensnare Ait.

Before Ait could recover from the agonizing cramps, darkness enveloped his vision, and he found himself wrapped in a cream-colored shower curtain.

Unfazed, he rolled and concealed himself beside the bathtub. Then, he grasped the shower curtain with both hands, using it as an improvised weapon.

With a soft whoosh, the curtain, now wrapped around Lumian’s fist, veered off course, thwarting his attempt to strike Ait’s head.

Ait seized the moment and rose, inadvertently tearing his pants in the process.

He swung his heavy fist at Lumian, hammer-like.

Lumian quickly raised his arm to shield himself, realizing that his opponent possessed exceptional strength—he couldn’t withstand it.

Forced to retreat a step in order to regain his balance, Lumian found himself on the backfoot. Ait wasted no time, relentlessly bombarding him with a flurry of punches from both hands.

Leveraging his height, long arms, and superior strength, Ait employed straightforward punches akin to cannonballs, neglecting any fancy techniques.

It was only then that he could clearly discern the assailant’s visage.

Golden hair tinged with black, bright and light-blue eyes, nostrils stuffed with bits of white paper—creating a peculiar sight.

Ciel? The same Ciel who killed Margot and gravely injured Wilson? Ait felt initial surprise, followed swiftly by delight.

He isn't that formidable. I can take him down completely!

The washroom proved confining, with Lumian enduring the putrid stench. He suffered two blows from the towering 1.9-meter giant before finding himself forced two steps back, cornered near the door.

At that moment, the mobsters outside heard the gunshots and hurriedly approached. One of them gripped the handle and pushed open the door.

Just as Ait's leg aimed for a low kick, Lumian's left leg suddenly swung back, forcefully striking the door.

With a resounding clang, the partially opened wooden door snapped shut again, narrowly missing the mobster's nose.

Realizing they couldn't breach the door for the time being, the mobsters drew their revolvers and aimed at the wooden barrier from various heights, but they dared not open fire.

Capitalizing on his kick against the rear door, Lumian contorted his body, evading Ait's straight punch and positioning himself beside his adversary.

Delivering a series of rapid strikes—punches, elbows, knees, and kicks—Lumian sought to disrupt the enemy's assault before they could fully unleash their power.

It resembled a Pugilist, the kind who habitually expelled force with grunts of "Heh!" and "Hah!", but now capable of only a single "Heh!" Each time Ait tried to strike with force, Lumian took the initiative and forcefully blocked him.

After altering his combat strategy, Lumian managed to narrow the strength gap between them. Not only did he regain some control, but he also utilized his greater agility to shift his body and change positions.

Soon enough, the figure blocking the washroom entrance turned out to be Ait, his back against the door.

Worried that his subordinates might lack intelligence and open fire from outside, accidentally killing him, Ait quickly diverted his attention and shouted, "Do not fire!"

Despite Ciel utilizing his technique to bridge the gap, Ait remained unfazed. He exuded immense confidence.

As long as he acted in a normal manner, he was certain he could eliminate his opponent in the confined washroom environment. The only uncertainty was the duration it would take.

Nevertheless, Ait remained vigilant. He continued to unleash powerful punches and kicks, attempting to force Lumian toward the window, creating an opportunity for his subordinates to enter.

Fearing that Lumian possessed some kind of Beyonder power, Ait believed that using the threat of a revolver would expedite the process of dispatching his enemy.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Lumian faced the relentless onslaught of the Pugilist's full-powered attacks without showing any signs of surrender. However, he found it increasingly strenuous.

Throughout this ordeal, Ait's eyes darted to his surroundings, wary of potential traps or powerful allies lying in ambush.

His gaze swept across the edge of the bathtub and landed on an open metal canister.

What purpose does it serve? Before Ait could ponder further, Lumian's mocking smile appeared, accompanied by a curse as he struggled to block Ait's onslaught.

"Useless piece of junk! What are you waiting for? Those outside, come in and lend a hand!"

A buzzing anger surged within Ait.

He discarded all other concerns and launched an unusually ferocious attack.

Provocation!

Lumian had added Provocation to those two sentences!

Confronted with the raging "Hammer" Ait and his devastating blows, Lumian fought desperately to hold his ground. Occasionally, he relied on the flexibility of a Dancer to shift positions.

Unbeknownst to him, he was gradually being pushed toward the wall with the window.

This allowed the washroom door to open, but the mobsters outside hesitated, fearing they might collide with "Hammer" if they kicked it open. They cautiously pushed it inward, inch by inch.

In that moment, Lumian, nearly overcome by the putrid odor, keenly sensed Ait's waning strength and slower attacks.

The sedative took effect! Lumian swiftly dodged to the side, regaining his balance. He threw a powerful punch, channeling all the strength from his arm and waist, launching a counterattack.

Bang!

Ait's arm, which had blocked the blow, visibly trembled, and his eyes betrayed a mix of surprise and panic.

Why? Why have I grown so weak?

Why have my reflexes slowed?

As Lumian grasped the state of his opponent, he unleashed two consecutive straight punches, forcefully parting the enemy's arms.

Without hesitation, he closed the distance and adjusted his body slightly. With a swift motion, he drove his left elbow into Ait's chest.

Caught off guard, Ait failed to react in time, unable to dodge the strike. The elbow connected, cracking his sternum. His vision darkened, and he struggled to catch his breath.

Lumian didn't grant him a moment's respite. He smoothly shifted his body, allowing his poised right fist to collide with Ait's abdomen.

He hadn't harbored any lofty expectations of rendering Ait unconscious solely with the sedative. After all, the other party possessed the ability to resist the effects of certain Beyonder powers through sheer physical and mental fortitude, suggesting a high resistance to the sedative. Furthermore, despite the compactness and semi-enclosed nature of the washroom, with its bathtub, toilet bowl, and sink, the drug's potency would be greatly diminished.

Lumian aimed to exploit the drug's influence to weaken Ait's combat prowess, slowing his reactions and substantially reducing his strength.

In doing so, the tide of victory would tip towards him uncontrollably!

Pfft!

Ait, reeling from the blow to his abdomen, instinctively curled up, becoming shorter than Lumian.

Seizing the opportunity, Lumian raised his fists and swiftly hammered them behind Ait's ears.

Bang!

Amidst the cacophony, Ait's vision faded to black, and he slumped unconscious.

It was the combined effect of a potent strike and the sedative.

Lumian squatted down, using “Hammer” as a shield.

The mobsters had already held the washroom door open for several seconds, but with Ait obstructing Lumian from their view, they refrained from opening fire.

Now, they witnessed their towering boss, Hammer, being taken down by the assailant.

Lumian clasped Ait and offered a smirk to the group gathered at the door.

“Go ahead! Fire! Why aren’t you firing?”

One of the mobsters caught sight of the assailant’s distinctive blonde and black hair, coupled with his rather handsome face, and suddenly pieced together a series of connections.

“Ciel? You’re Ciel?” he exclaimed, his surprise evident.

The same Ciel who killed Boss Margot and threw Boss Wilson off the fourth floor?

Ciel of the Savoie Mob?

He’s back at it?

Lumian keenly sensed the mobsters’ profound fear. He grinned and gave Ait’s shoulder a friendly pat, brushing off the dust.

Then, he took hold of Ait and proceeded towards the washroom door, one step at a time.

Simultaneously, he curled his lips into a smile.

“You’ve got two options. One, leave this room now and seek help from your Poison Spur Mob boss. Two, meet your demise here, one by one, at my hands.”

As he spoke, he advanced, a cold gaze sweeping across the faces of each mobster, as if contemplating the best way to eliminate them.

The mobsters couldn’t help but tremble, as a similar thought crossed their minds: Regardless, Boss Hammer has been apprehended. If we open fire, we’ll only harm him. It might be wiser to seek help from the boss!

“Well?” Lumian snorted, urging them to decide.

With a swift swoosh, the first mobster turned on his heels and fled the room. The others followed suit, abandoning any notion of confrontation.

When no one remained, Lumian let out a silent sigh of relief.

If those men had truly steeled themselves, their hearts unswayed by fear, the confined space of the washroom and their ten firearms would have posed a lethal threat.

Of course, Ait could forget about survival as well.

They have no more than four minutes to reach Avenue du Marché from here… I must conclude the interrogation before "Black Scorpion" Roger and his comrades depart, granting me ample time to escape the scene and locate Baron Brignais at Salle de Bal Brise… Just four minutes… As Lumian assessed the current situation, he squatted down and propped Ait against the washroom's door panel.

Then, he dislocated his captive's shoulder joints and bound his legs together using a shower curtain. Opening the window, he allowed the breeze to circulate from both sides.

With these tasks completed, Lumian removed the paper balls from his own nose, retrieved the metal canister containing the pungent gas, and held it to Ait's nostrils.

Achoo!

Ait sneezed, his eyes fluttering open.

Lumian promptly stowed away the metal canister, capping it, ensuring the other party remained in a weakened state.

"What do you want?" Ait asked, fear and anxiety evident in his eyes as he recognized the person before him.

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Chapter 170 - 170 Nightstalkers

170 Nightstalkers

Lumian brandished Hedsey's dagger, a sly grin forming on his face.

"I've got a question for you."

"You could've come straight to me. No need for all this," Ait instinctively tried to stall for time.

With a quick glance, he scanned the room from the corner of his eye, but there were no lifeless bodies to be found.

Based on his combat with Ciel, Ait knew it was impossible for the other party to eliminate ten armed thugs without a single one escaping.

In fact, even Ait himself wouldn't dare to face the encirclement of ten revolvers in such a confined space. He might take down three or four of them, but he would surely meet his demise.

If Ait, with his abilities, couldn't pull it off, there was no way Ciel—who he believed to be somewhat weaker and reliant on cunning strategies—could achieve such a feat.

Given the circumstances, Ait assumed most of his ten subordinates had fled, while a few might have sought assistance from the Black Scorpion.

With this realization, a strong desire to survive surged within Ait.

As long as I don't anger Ciel and can buy myself six to seven minutes, there's a good chance I'll be saved!

"If I hadn't done this, how else could I have crossed paths with you, considering my relationship with your Poison Spur Mob?" Lumian deliberately created the illusion that he didn't intend to spill blood.

He raised the dagger, emphasizing his point.

"Enough with the games. Answer my questions. You know I'm not a patient person. If you refuse or lie, I'll end your life right here. I can always ask 'Baldy' Harman later. After all, there are plenty of folks in your Poison Spur Mob who know about those matters."

Lumian had compelled the mobsters to depart, not only due to the situation but also to seize control of the situation.

If he didn't make Ait believe he still had a fighting chance, prying answers from him in a short amount of time without employing mystical means would be futile.

A person who clung to hope would fear death all the more!

Ait promptly responded, "Alright!"

He resolved to divulge some information, delving into the details, hoping to hold out for those crucial six to seven minutes.

Naturally, he contemplated whether Ciel might abandon the inquiry at the last moment and execute him. Yet, aside from cooperating, Ait had no other choice. He could only hope the information he shared would be valuable enough to captivate Ciel's interest and prevent an untimely demise.

About three minutes… Lumian silently counted the seconds and posed his next question.

"Have you encountered Louis Lund?"

Ait hesitated.

In a swift motion, Lumian swung the dagger, piercing Ait's shoulder and eliciting a gush of crimson blood.

Ait, his expression contorted, felt the unyielding ruthlessness emanating from Lumian and sensed the specter of impending death drawing near. Fear gripped his heart.

He blurted out, "Yes! Wanted posters for Louis Lund can be found in Salle de Gristmill and many other places. The moment I laid eyes on him at the Boss's hideout, I recognized him."

Ait realized he couldn't rely on silence and hesitation to gain more time. That would only lead to uncontrollable consequences.

Lying was also risky since he couldn't be certain which questions Ciel was using to test his honesty.

In comparison, offering convoluted yet seemingly valuable information would be more likely to appease the other party.

As expected… Lumian was delighted.

Having confirmed the connection between Louis Lund and the Poison Spur Mob's "Black Scorpion" Roger, Lumian had achieved his objective for this operation. The remaining questions were just an added bonus. It would be nice to get

answers, but it wouldn't be a deal-breaker if he didn't.

"Why did he go to 'Black Scorpion' Roger?" Lumian inquired further.

Ait shook his head.

"I'm not aware of the specifics, but I've heard that the lady Louis Lund is loyal to has arrived in Trier. She wants our Poison Spur Mob and their respective spheres of influence to coordinate efforts and avoid conflicts.

"Our boss, with the approval of Madame Moon, took charge of the liaison."

"Madame Moon?" Lumian never expected another Madame Moon to enter the picture.

He didn't even know what was happening with Madame Night.

"Madame Moon is the one the Poison Spur Mob swears loyalty to. Well, our boss has mentioned that she's not just a Madame anymore, but a Lady who Births Deities. We often offer prayers to her. I haven't seen her myself; only the Boss and Baldy have."

Not Madame… From Madame Moon to Lady who Births Deities… Had she received more boons and elevated her status? Lumian nodded in understanding.

"What's the relationship between Madame Moon and Madame Night?"

"They both belong to an organization called the Nightstalkers. Madame Moon appears to be the leader, or at least a significant figure at the leadership level." Ait provided a convoluted description of what he knew.

A secret organization that believes in some hidden existence? Lumian redirected the conversation to the matter that intrigued him the most.

"Will Louis Lund visit 'Black Scorpion' Roger again?"

"He'll likely come back next week to check if everyone has followed through on their agreements and if any adjustments are needed. I don't know the exact timing," Ait honestly responded.

I'll have the chance to reunite with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché next week? And I'll be stationed there permanently after Sunday! Lumian felt a surge of delight and excitement.

He then pressed on, asking,

"What kind of power does 'Black Scorpion' Roger possess?"

"H-he's a Heretic Spellmaster," Ait stammered instinctively. "Our boss said it himself. The essence of a Heretic Spellmaster is using their life force to cast spells. It can be their own life force or someone else's, but it seems they need to be

controlled beforehand."

So he truly is a Heretic Spellmaster… Truly wicked and cruel… Lumian recalled the battle with the midwife.

Observing Lumian's lack of surprise, Ait felt a sense of relief for not lying. He continued, "I've witnessed him using a few spells. One is a peculiar curse, another involves manipulating blood, then there's a kind of black flame that weakens people, and finally, he has some effects on corpses and ghosts. I don't know much else."

There's at least one more—the ability to create a 'turf' filled with undead creatures, allowing him to share damage and mysteriously teleport… Lumian silently muttered, his gaze fixed on Ait, gesturing for him to continue.

Ait steeled himself and spoke.

"Our boss also mentioned that if we perform well, he might receive more boons and become a Sower."

Having said that, Ait regretted his decision not to choose a boon back then and instead opt for a potion. It had caused his progress to be hindered by the need for ingredients and other factors. The hope of reaching Sequence 7 seemed distant.

As long as one contributed enough and their body could withstand it, they could attain more boons.

A Sower? A symbol of abundance and life? Hmm, when Madame Pualis was still Pulitt, he had many illegitimate children. He was despised by countless people in the Dariège area, to the point that his family had to disown him and pretend he had gone missing… Could this be a manifestation of a Sower's powers? Did Pulitt lose control under the influence of the boons? And after becoming a Sower, it appears that he underwent a gender transformation. Is that the level equivalent to the Madames, or is it one Sequence higher than them? Lumian's mind raced with numerous thoughts.

Observing Lumian's expression, Ait continued speaking.

"I don't know what comes after Sower. All I know is that Wilson is a Villain, equivalent to Sequence 9. Harman is a Gardener, and his strength is similar to mine, but he possesses extensive knowledge of botany. He can create potions with magical effects. Yes, he has a potion that temporarily hardens his skin like tree bark. I tried slashing him with a knife, but he only suffered minor injuries. He also has medicines to treat various illnesses and injuries."

So, becoming a Heretic Spellmaster requires being a Gardener. No wonder the midwife used those giant scissors as a weapon… Fortunately, I obtained this information. If I had assassinated "Baldy" Harman without giving him time to react, he wouldn't have used his body to shield Fallen Mercury… Targeted intelligence is truly valuable… Lumian sighed with a mix of emotions.

Ait pondered for a moment and continued, “Harman once mentioned that the spiritual monsters born from trees and flowers become highly frightened when they see him since he is a Gardener and responsible for their pruning.”

Ait, who was trying to buy more time, quickly brought up another topic.

“Our boss mentioned that among the unrecognized paramount beings, only three can bestow godhood without much difficulty. One is the Great Mother of our faith, another has ‘Desire’ and ‘Tree’ in its name, and the third appears to be a mysterious fog. As for the other beings, if they wish to grant godhood, they have to perform a very, very complex ritual that would easily be discovered and destroyed.”

The Mother Tree of Desire? What sets them apart from the being with the name Inevitability? Why can they bestow godhood without the need for an extensive ritual? Heh heh, I wonder what will happen when a Gardener encounters a Fallen Tree Spirit, the latter undergoing a suppression brought about by their inherent order in the hierarchy? Lumian’s thoughts raced, and he suddenly changed the subject.

“Who is the candidate for parliament you support?”

“It’s Hugues Artois from the Enlightenment Party.” Ait’s anticipation grew as he noticed that quite some time had passed.

If those rascals hurry, they’ll meet the Boss!

Ait, who was waiting for Lumian to ask about the Poison Spur Mob’s recent plans, suddenly saw the other party raise his right hand and swing his dagger.

With a soft sound, the dagger pierced Ait’s temples and stirred them a few times.

Ait’s mouth hung open in horror, and his eyes grew desperate and unfocused.

With a thud, he collapsed, no longer drawing breath.

Lumian left the dagger lodged in Ait’s head and swiftly bandaged his wounds. He then stowed away his belongings, shouldered the lifeless body, and pushed open the room’s window before leaping down.

Since it was only the second floor, his landing was steady, and he broke into a run.

Instead of taking the most direct route, Lumian opted for a detour through Rue du Rossignol, making his way to Avenue du Marché.

The late-night atmosphere offered scarce street lamps, casting a pitch-black darkness that seemed to consume anyone on the road.

It took Lumian over two minutes to carry Ait’s corpse to the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise.

The two mobsters guarding the entrance were about to halt him when they recognized Ciel's face.

As a result, they ceased their interference and allowed him to enter.

…

In the second-floor café, Louis approached Baron Brignais's side, carrying a stack of papers, a black revolver, a bayonet, and a bag of bullets.

"Baron, I have everything prepared for Ciel."

More information and weapons.

Baron Brignais nodded.

"Send them to Auberge du Coq Doré tomorrow morning."

After issuing the instructions, Baron Brignais spoke with anticipation, "I wonder what kind of performance he will stage for us and when he will make his move. Do you think he will choose 'Hammer' Ait, 'Baldy' Harman, or 'Short-legged Candlestick'…"

Before Baron Brignais could finish his sentence, the sound of approaching footsteps interrupted him.

The mobster guarding the first-floor entrance wore a terrified expression as he addressed Baron Brignais, "C-Ciel is here! He—he's carrying someone—or rather, a corpse!"

At that moment, Lumian emerged from the staircase, a smile on his face. His steps seemed heavier than usual.

"That is?" Baron Brignais looked at the lifeless body trailing behind Ciel, a mixture of confusion and seriousness on his face.

Lumian tossed the corpse to the ground, clapped his hands, and grinned.

"'Hammer' Ait."

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Chapter 171 - 171 Rapid Idea

171 Rapid Idea

With a resounding thud, the lifeless body crashed to the floor, sending a shockwave through the hearts of Baron Brignais, Louis, and their comrades.

Baron Brignais rose to his feet and beheld the corpse lying at Lumian's feet. He took in the tangle of abundant, disheveled brown hair, the lengthy limbs, and the imposing, robust physique.

It was none other than "Hammer" Ait!

Louis's eyes widened in disbelief at the realization that the treacherous member of the Savoie Mob lay dead on the café floor.

The baron had entrusted the task to Ciel right after dinner, and the hour had not even struck ten.

What's more, Ciel had managed to accomplish the mission before they could deliver the comprehensive intelligence and weaponry that would have enhanced his chances of success.

Moreover, "Hammer" Ait was a true Beyonder, surpassing even Wilson from before in strength. He wasn't as vulnerable as Margot, always surrounded by a retinue of followers. Yet, he had failed to survive three hours after the baron had issued the assignment.

Was this any different from purchasing a pig at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman and slaughtering it?

Even if the baron had taken personal action, it wouldn't have been that effortless or straightforward. It could have even ended in failure.

Louis's gaze shifted from the lifeless body to Ciel's countenance, as if only now did he truly perceive the true nature of this rural novice.

It was somewhat understandable that Margot had fallen prey to him due to carelessness and the poisoned slash. Wilson's defeat could be explained away by his own feebleness and entrapment within the room. However, "Hammer" Ait was a Beyonder whose combat prowess was not significantly inferior to the baron's, and he had always been on high alert against potential assassinations by the Savoie Mob. He wouldn't have been careless.

Yet, Ciel had managed to dispatch such a formidable adversary within a matter of hours!

Just how formidable was he?

What were his limits?

In comparison to the baron, who was the stronger one?

A cascade of questions raced through Louis's mind, and his gaze at Lumian now held a tinge of fear.

The other thugs shared the same unease.

Baron Brignais's gaze constantly shifted between "Hammer" Ait's lifeless form and Lumian's visage, as if searching for any trace of deceit.

Had Lumian Lee effortlessly completed a mission that the baron himself would have considered challenging?

If "Hammer" Ait was so easily dispatched, why had the Savoie Mob, who had long sought to punish the traitor, allowed him to live until now?

This guy is even more terrifying than I had suspected. In terms of strength, intelligence, execution, and seizing opportunities, he is no less capable than I am… He must be concealing some secrets. There's more to him than meets the eye… Baron Brignais barely contained the turmoil within his heart and reclaimed the clarity, rationality, and intelligence he typically boasted.

Baron Brignais's expression turned to stone as he locked eyes with Lumian.

"Does anyone else know that you've taken down 'Hammer' Ait?"

Lumian replied candidly, "Quite a few."

Baron Brignais's countenance underwent a dramatic shift, losing its refined and confident air.

In that moment, all he wanted was to unleash a torrent of curses upon Lumian.

Is your f*cking brain filled with shit? So many people are aware of your involvement in 'Hammer' Ait's demise, and yet you boldly bring his lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise, right in front of me?

Do you think that these individuals won't inform 'Black Scorpion' Roger? Do you believe he won't storm into Salle de Bal Brise seeking revenge?

Do you think I can fend off 'Black Scorpion' Roger? Damn it, you're leading me to my own demise!

You better find a bloody corner to hide in at Underground Trier!

Seizing the opportunity presented by Baron Brignais's subdued breathing and silence, Lumian smiled nonchalantly and said, "'Hammer' Ait's subordinates must have found 'Black Scorpion' Roger by now. Only you, Baron, can offer me sufficient protection.

"Baron, weren't you anticipating retaliation from the Poison Spur Mob? That's why you sent me to hunt down one of the trio—Hammer, Baldy, or Short-legged Candlestick?"

Bitterness filled Baron Brignais's mouth at Lumian's question. For a brief moment, he couldn't bring himself to order Lumian to leave.

He had made two plans in preparation for the potential revenge from the Poison Spur Mob. He was confident that he would remain unscathed.

Wouldn't it be a fortuitous outcome if "Giant" Simon and "Rat" Christo met their end?

But the predicament lay in the fact that he hadn't had enough time to implement any of his plans or set them into motion!

His intention was to dispatch the intelligence and weaponry to Auberge du Coq Doré tomorrow morning, and only then would he decide on the course of action. Nonetheless, eliminating any leader of the Poison Spur Mob was no easy feat. It would likely require days of meticulous effort before he could even set foot inside their domain.

Yet, Lumian Lee, that madman, had sought out "Hammer" Ait without delay upon accepting the mission. He wasted no time, conducted no reconnaissance, made no arrangements, and didn't wait for the opportune moment to arise.

What further infuriated the baron was that the fellow had actually succeeded! In a matter of hours, he had slain "Hammer" Ait and dragged the lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise!

F*ck, is he even human?

This caught him off guard. If "Black Scorpion" Roger were to strike, he might meet his demise alongside "Hammer" Ait.

Observing Baron Brignais's silence and darkened expression, Lumian inwardly chuckled.

He had brought "Hammer" Ait's body to Salle de Bal Brise and presented it to Baron Brignais not to boast or intimidate the gang leader and his henchmen.

His intention was to draw "Black Scorpion" Roger and the other formidable members of the Poison Spur Mob to them!

If Baron Brignais were to fall, a new opportunity would arise. A replacement with sufficient strength would be required. When the time came, Ciel, who could fight, contribute, and had aided Red Boots' lover, would undoubtedly be the most sought-after candidate!

Lumian wasn't overly concerned about whether "Black Scorpion" Roger would kill him.

Mr. K's finger was in his pocket!

Mr. K probably wouldn't mind if I repurposed the finger. After all, I'm doing it to fulfill his mission… Lumian thought casually.

Regardless, the threat from Susanna Mattise wouldn't come anytime soon. He could figure out an alternative approach later. Perhaps Mr. K would reward him with another finger once he saw how well and swiftly Lumian completed the mission?

Baron Brignais's expression underwent several changes. He pushed his chair back abruptly and hurried toward an iron-colored mechanical safe at the café bar counter.

He turned the knob and entered the password.

Lumian watched with a raised eyebrow, puzzled.

What was Baron Brignais planning to retrieve? Was he intending to take the cash and flee?

Or did he possess Sealed Artifacts that he dared not carry with him, fearing their potent negative effects, and had stowed them away in the safe?

Soon enough, Baron Brignais opened the safe and retrieved two bundles of detonators—commonly used in quarries.

Setting a trap to explode "Black Scorpion" Roger? That's quite challenging. He's a Heretic Spellmaster… Lumian refrained from inquiring as he observed Baron Brignais walk toward the wall near Avenue du Marché and push open two glass windows.

The leader of the Savoie Mob placed the bundles of detonators on the windowsill, then lit a match.

Subsequently, he ignited one of the bundles and glanced at the dimly lit Avenue du Marché. Raising his hand, he tossed the explosives into the middle of the road.

Louis and the other mobsters stood in bewilderment, unable to comprehend the baron's intentions.

Lumian's thoughts raced, and he instantly grasped the plan. He couldn't help but inwardly applaud, Very clever…

Boom!

The bundle of detonators exploded in the middle of Avenue du Marché, causing the surrounding glass to rattle.

The few pedestrians on the roadside were startled and fell to the ground, sustaining minor injuries. Some screamed, covering their ears, and frantically sought shelter in nearby locations.

Baron Brignais glanced over, lit another bundle of detonators, and hurled it into the deserted road. Causing casualties would be troublesome aftermath. He didn't wish to attract unwanted attention from authorities.

Boom!

The explosion reverberated once more. The police headquarters on Avenue du Marché, the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, and the God of Steam and Machinery cathedral responded to a certain extent.

Salle de Bal Brise and the occupants of nearby buildings were thrown into disarray, but they dared not venture outside.

Baron Brignais clapped his hands and returned to the wooden table. He pulled a chair over and sat down.

Resuming his usual demeanor, he smiled at Lumian.

"It's all right now."

This would surely unsettle the police and the clergymen. Some would undoubtedly investigate the cause. It was highly probable that official Beyonders would be among them.

Officers who maintained good relations with the Savoie Mob would inevitably inquire.

Under such circumstances, how could "Black Scorpion" Roger dare to launch an attack?

They couldn't risk assuming that no official Beyonders would care about the explosion. After all, if they lost that bet, they would be doomed!

Lumian hadn't expected Baron Brignais to find a way to elude "Black Scorpion" Roger's assault in such a short span of time. And he had accomplished it using only the resources at hand.

This had momentarily foiled his plan.

True to the reputation of the Savoie Mob's 'brain,' Baron Brignais displays remarkable responsiveness and quick thinking, surpassing even Margot, "Hammer" Ait, and the others in critical moments. Lumian clicked his tongue in acknowledgment, paying no mind to Hammer's lifeless body on the ground. Taking a seat across from Baron Brignais, he flashed a smile.

"I made the wise choice to seek refuge here."

Baron Brignais nearly choked, his saliva catching in his throat.

Had it not been for his exceptional intellect, he might have been ensnared and faced a grave fate!

Exhaling slowly, Baron Brignais cast a glance at the motionless corpse and addressed Louis and the rest, "Drag it into a private room and conceal it carefully. The authorities will likely come knocking soon."

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Chapter 172 - 172 Superintendent

172 Superintendent

After concealing the body, Baron Brignais nonchalantly addressed Lumian, his curiosity piqued.

“I must say, I’m quite intrigued. How did you manage to eliminate ‘Hammer’ Ait?”

Lumian didn’t hold back, revealing everything. He retrieved an empty metal canister and placed it on the table before him.

“What’s this?” Baron Brignais examined it carefully for a few moments.

“Remember when I ventured underground earlier today?” Lumian grinned. “I encountered a deviant individual and, quite accidentally, dispatched him. He happened to possess this gaseous sedative and its corresponding antidote.”

“After infiltrating ‘Hammer’ Ait’s washroom, I consumed the antidote and patiently awaited his arrival. When he entered, I unscrewed the sedative and engaged him in close combat. I restrained him, preventing his escape until the sedative took effect.”

Baron Brignais pondered for a brief moment, confirming the plausibility of this plan. Satisfied, he nodded and remarked, “The washroom is rather confined, and the gaseous sedative will quickly permeate the space. Moreover, there’s no ventilation to speak of. Considering ‘Hammer’ Ait’s cautious nature and his guard against our Savoie Mob, he wouldn’t offer an easy opportunity for infiltration.”

“The gunmen stationed outside wouldn’t dare to open fire, lest they accidentally eliminate ‘Hammer’ Ait. They might even struggle to unlock the restroom door.”

Baron Brignais spoke with such conviction that it seemed he had witnessed the scene firsthand.

Louis and the others silently acknowledged the validity of this analysis.

Having understood the intricacies, they realized that Ciel’s ability to dispatch “Hammer” Ait within such a short span of time wasn’t as implausible as they had initially thought.

Ciel had indeed discovered a path to success and skillfully utilized the resources at his disposal.

Under this plan, as long as his combat prowess didn't significantly pale in comparison to "Hammer" Ait's, he had a considerable chance of dealing with the traitor.

Naturally, achieving success necessitated strength, a stroke of luck, decisiveness, audacity, and adeptness in gathering intelligence.

Ciel's terror was undeniable, yet it wasn't as horrifying as they had envisioned.

Baron Brignais further commended Lumian's sagacity, albeit slightly displeased that he had transported "Hammer" Ait's lifeless body to Salle de Bal Brise after accomplishing the deed. It had nearly brought calamity upon him.

Nevertheless, Baron Brignais harbored no intention of reprimanding him.

Upon reflection, he realized that the fault lay primarily with himself.

It seems I habitually exude an excessive air of confidence and intellect. As if nothing can perplex me. No wonder he assumes that I can provide ample protection and remain unafraid of 'Black Scorpion' Roger.

I even proposed this operation. It's only natural for him to believe that I've already made all necessary preparations.

As they conversed, time slipped away. Before long, a guard from the Savoie Mob stationed at the entrance on the first floor ascended and approached Baron Brignais, conveying a message.

"Please, bring him up." Baron Brignais stood and made his way toward the staircase.

Travis Everett served as the superintendent at the police headquarters of Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. He held one of the highest positions when it came to carrying out tasks. Above him stood a few deputy directors with the rank of chief superintendent, and overseeing everything was the police commissioner of the district.

Baron Brignais enjoyed conversing with Everett. Emperor Roselle's words described him as the epitome of a "Mr. Nice Guy." He preferred not to delve into the truth, simply hoping for harmonious interactions and a lack of trouble. He possessed a remarkable ability to resolve conflicts between the mobs in the market district.

Ten seconds later, the officer led his two subordinates into the café on the second floor.

Travis Everett appeared to be around 30 years old and stood nearly 1.75 meters tall. His black hair was cropped short, and he wore glasses with relatively large black frames that framed his blue eyes. His chin was slightly broad.

Dressed in a black police uniform, his epaulets showcased five-petaled irises in silver-white against the black background. This indicated his rank as a superintendent. If there were seven petals, he would hold the rank of chief superintendent, and above that, an off-white diamond square.

Travis Everett looked at the smiling Baron Brignais and asked with a stern expression, “What just happened? Please don’t tell me there was an explosion at the entrance of Salle de Bal Brise, and you have no idea who did it!”

“Monsieur Superintendent, please have a seat.” Baron Brignais guided Travis Everett to a wooden table and personally pulled out a chair for him.

Lumian, disguising himself as one of the thugs alongside Louis and the others, stood behind Baron Brignais, avoiding direct confrontation with the officers to prevent recognition as a wanted criminal.

Baron Brignais picked up his mahogany pipe and gazed at Travis Everett across from him. With a grave expression, he spoke, “‘Hammer’ Ait is dead. I was concerned that ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger would go into a frenzy, so I detonated the explosives and drew everyone’s attention. Rest assured, Monsieur Superintendent, I carefully chose the location of the blast. I didn’t harm or seriously injure anyone.”

Travis Everett raised his right hand, adjusted his black-framed glasses, and pointed at Baron Brignais.

“Can you all refrain from causing so much trouble? The parliamentary election is taking place next week. Do you want us to embarrass ourselves in front of our future superior?

“I don’t care about your intentions, nor do I wish to know your motives. All I desire is a peaceful market district.

“If something similar occurs again, I will propose to Monsieur Aymerck that Bureau 8 and the two Churches form a joint investigative team to handle your Savoie Mob!”

Aymerck served as one of Trier’s police commissioners, overseeing Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Travis Everett did not mention the death of “Hammer” Ait directly, but he employed it as a warning to Baron Brignais.

Baron Brignais responded with a smile, “Monsieur Superintendent, fear not. For the next two weeks, we shall strictly adhere to the law. I am merely concerned about the Poison Spur Mob…”

Travis Everett nodded and let out a sigh.

“Emperor Roselle proclaimed that peace brings prosperity. If you do encounter any disputes, you can seek me out for a tribunal.”

He then turned to the two lower-ranking officers beside him and said, “Let us return now and find someone to keep a close watch on the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob. We must ensure they behave.”

The superintendent rose from his seat and extended his arms.

“Praise the Sun!”

“Praise the Sun!” Baron Brignais also stood up, echoing the sentiment.

As Travis Everett and his companions descended the stairs, Lumian muttered quietly to himself, Do people in positions of power always enjoy quoting Emperor Roselle? We lower-class individuals are different. We curse and use crude language as needed. The sense of a sentence doesn’t depend on who utters it…

Nearly half an hour later, Baron Brignais turned to Lumian and spoke, “‘Black Scorpion’ Roger and the others should be under surveillance. There is no immediate danger.

“You may return to Auberge du Coq Doré to rest now. Come here at 10:30 a.m. tomorrow. I will take you to meet the boss.”

“Alright,” Lumian replied with a smile. “Thank you, Baron.”

He then inquired, “According to the rules, since I was the one who killed ‘Hammer’ Ait, all his belongings belong to me, correct?”

“That is correct,” Baron Brignais confirmed, displaying a generous nature when it came to such matters.

He motioned for Louis to bring over the black revolver, bullet bag, bayonet, and stack of intelligence.

“These are yours as well.”

Lumian fastened the holster under his left armpit and stowed away the other items before entering the room where “Hammer” Ait’s lifeless body lay.

Ensuring no one was tailing him, he squatted down and unbuttoned the corpse’s shirt.

There, he discovered a golden-red ball resembling the morning clouds and sunset, with a faint flickering light dancing within.

This was a Pugilist Beyonder characteristic!

Lumian happily pocketed it and proceeded to search “Hammer” Ait’s pockets. He found 116 verl d’or and 17 coppet notes and coins, along with a pair of boxing gloves made of steel-like material, adorned with several sharp spikes.

For Lumian, this bounty far exceeded the satisfaction of hunting Margot.

On his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré, only sporadic gas street lamps illuminated the path. Lumian weaved through the intersecting shadows, sensing pairs of eyes fixated on him.

Is ‘Black Scorpion’ Roger commanding the deceased or using other Beyonder abilities to keep tabs on me? Or am I simply being overly vigilant and imagining things? Lumian muttered, raising his right hand to massage his temples.

He activated his Spirit Vision but found nothing amiss.

The unsettling feeling of being watched gradually faded away.

…

In the three-story building with a garden at 126 Avenue du Marché.

The imposing “Black Scorpion” Roger, with his piercing deep-blue eyes, and the charming “Baldy” Harman walked back through the door.

The ten members of the Poison Spur Mob, who had been waiting anxiously, felt the air grow tense and their fear heightened. None of them dared to utter a word, as if they were facing an impending storm.

After a tense silence that lasted for more than ten seconds, “Baldy” Harman gritted his teeth and spoke up,

“That Ciel doesn’t take us seriously. The Savoie Mob has been provoking us repeatedly. They must pay the price!”

“Black Scorpion” Roger shared Harman’s sentiment, feeling equally provoked by Ciel. He spoke in a low, commanding voice,

“We cannot let this matter go unaddressed!”

Phew… Roger exhaled heavily and motioned for the other members of the Poison Spur Mob to leave.

Only Harman remained, and Roger continued, “But we are being targeted by the police. It is highly likely that official Beyonders will be involved. We cannot seek revenge for the time being.

“Brignais is no ordinary opponent. He is cunning and intelligent.

“When Monsieur Artois is elected to parliament, Madame Moon will grant us a new boon. At that time, I will extract Brignais’s brain and feed it to the stray dogs!

“However, we cannot remain idle. When the surveillance on us becomes less vigilant, I will seize the opportunity to assassinate Ciel!

“If the Savoie Mob can assassinate our men, then we can do the same to theirs!”

…

At Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian had just reached Room 207 when he sensed something. He turned his head and directed his gaze towards the nearby balcony.

“Come out,” he said with a resigned sigh. “Madame Jenna.”

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Chapter 173 - 173 Intelligence on the Boss

173 Intelligence on the Boss

With her hair tied up in a simple bun, Showy Diva emerged from the shadows of the balcony, her eyes adorned with dark shadows and a mole positioned neatly on her nose.

Curiosity evident in her voice, she asked, “How did you discover me? How did you know it was me?”

Being an Assassin, she had mastered the art of utilizing darkness and shadows to conceal her presence. Until now, no one had ever detected her in her previous encounters, making this the first time she had been discovered.

Lumian scoffed in response.

“Next time you plan on assassinating someone, remember not to wear perfume.”

After reminding Jenna, he jokingly pointed towards the door of Room 207 and said, “I thought you would enter the room yourself, but instead, you waited so politely on the balcony. It’s unlike you.”

“Dammit, I’ve always been polite!” Jenna retorted, feeling a hint of anger at the accusation.

After a brief pause, she muttered, “You’re cold, sinister, cunning, and devious. You might have set a trap in the room, waiting for someone to walk into it.”

While speaking, Jenna glanced at Lumian and indignantly said, “I understand how you guessed that I’m an Assassin!

“First, you connected the dots from the perfect infiltration route I provided. Then, you deliberately probed me. F*ck, if I had been calmer, you would have said, ‘Haha, I’m joking.’”

“Madame Jenna, your reflex arc is a little long,” Lumian laughed.

“What ‘Madame’ or ‘Miss.’ You’re not one to be polite either. Just call me Jenna,” she controlled her urge to curse and curiously asked, “What’s a reflex arc?”

She had a feeling it wasn’t something favorable, but she couldn’t quite grasp its meaning.

Miss, did you complete your compulsory education? Lumian criticized. As he opened the door, he casually explained, “For instance, you, Franca, Baron Brignais, and ‘Hammer’ Ait hear me telling a joke simultaneously. Franca and Baron Brignais burst into laughter instantly, but it takes you a whole day to find me and say, ‘Haha, how funny.’”

“Dammit! You bastard!” Jenna finally realized she had been mocked.

Following Lumian into Room 207, she asked in confusion, “What about ‘Hammer’ Ait? Why isn’t he laughing?”

Lumian turned his head and solemnly glanced at her.

“Dead people don’t laugh.”

Jenna was momentarily taken aback before she burst into laughter, her body swaying slightly.

“You, haha, you truly have a sense of humor…” She intermittently expressed amidst her laughter.

Lumian ignited the carbide lamp in the room and settled on the edge of the bed. He inquired, “What brings you to Auberge du Coq Doré?”

“I’ve come to retrieve my gun!” Jenna shut the door behind her and dragged over the old, worn armchair. Placing it in front of her, she sat down, resting her elbows on the backrest.

Her eyes sparkled with curiosity she couldn’t conceal.

“But don’t tell me how you did it just yet. Let me take a guess.

“You… asked me about the size of the washroom. That means you intended to exploit the environment there.

“F*ck! I’ve got it, I’ve got it! You have that pervert’s sedative on hand. It’s perfect for a place like the washroom. It’s like trapping a pigeon!

“Dammit, I can imagine ‘Hammer’ Ait’s desperate expression as he struggled, realizing his strength was dwindling. The thugs outside couldn’t enter, and they didn’t dare to shoot randomly…”

The more Jenna spoke, the more animated she became, as if she were the one who had carried out the assassination of “Hammer” Ait.

“At least you have some wits about you,” Lumian begrudgingly acknowledged.

“Heh!” Jenna waved her hand and peered at Lumian. “What I can’t figure out is why you weren’t affected by the sedative. Did you smell that bottle of ‘shit’ beforehand? Can its effects last that long?”

Lumian simply smiled.

“I recall something you once said. Avoid seeing what I shouldn’t, hearing what I shouldn’t, and asking questions I shouldn’t.”

“…” Jenna glared at Lumian in frustration and refrained from further probing.

Lumian produced her compact revolver and tossed it to her.

Jenna caught it deftly and let out a chuckle.

“You didn’t even dare to come up to me and return it in person?”

She smacked her lips and clicked her tongue.

“Is there something about me that frightens you?”

In that moment, she felt as if she had returned to teasing Lumian when they first met.

Lumian appraised her.

“You’re quite audacious to enter a male stranger’s room dressed like this in the middle of the night.”

Jenna was dressed as she typically would for her evening performances. Her white blouse revealed a generous amount of her chest, and her off-white fluffy short skirt didn’t provide much coverage as her legs spread on either side of the backrest.

Jenna deliberately covered her mouth and let out a soft chuckle.

“I was defenseless down in the underground, yet you didn’t make a move, let alone now.

“Do you still hold onto your virginity? Need some help? A mature and beautiful sister can show you the wonders of the adult world.”

As she spoke, she intentionally lowered her body, revealing her cleavage to Lumian.

Lumian didn’t flinch and observed calmly.

Who would be frightened by such a thing?

Jenna’s expectation of a fleeting gaze and a flushed expression from Lumian gradually transformed into discomfort.

She sat up straight and muttered, “Lame, coward…”

In the next instant, Lumian stood up abruptly.

Jenna's expression underwent a sudden change.

"What are you planning to do?"

Lumian's lips curled into a smirk as he turned toward the wooden table.

"Just pouring some light beer. Fancy a glass?"

Auberge du Coq Doré didn't offer the option of boiling water. The tenants either drank tap water or resorted to light beer as a substitute.

"…No, thanks." Jenna let out a relieved sigh.

Lumian took a few swigs of light beer and redirected the conversation.

"How can you be so certain that you're older than me?"

"I saw your wanted poster at Franca's. Well, hello there, Lumian. You're not even 18 yet, while I've already reached 21!" Jenna's satisfaction started to surface.

"Is your mental age only 12?" Lumian taunted before inquiring, "How did you come to know the infiltration route to that room?"

Franca had long harbored the desire to carry out an assassination against the Poison Spur Mob?

Jenna pursed her lips and replied, "I've been gathering intelligence for nearly a month, awaiting the perfect opportunity to assassinate Margot. But you beat me to it."

Margot had previously overseen the Salle de Gristmill.

"Do you hold a grudge against Margot?" Lumian asked.

"He didn't do anything to me." Jenna lowered her gaze slightly. "When I first arrived in the market district, searching for singing opportunities in various dance halls, I encountered another Showy Diva singer. She was a few years older than me and took me under her wing. She even helped refine my singing and guided me towards a chance to perform. Over a month ago, Margot violated her. F*cking dammit, did he think all Showy Divas were open for his taking? Afterwards, she left the market district. I later heard she was committed to an asylum…

"That was when I pleaded with Franca to obtain Beyonder powers and assist her."

Lumian fell silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"You see, one mustn't hesitate. When I made up my mind to kill Margot that morning, I carried out the deed that very night."

Jenna found herself both enraged and entertained.

“Well, everyone has their own style!”

Lumian changed the subject.

“Tomorrow morning, Baron Brignais will take me to meet the Boss. Do you have any insights on what kind of person he is?”

Jenna pondered for a moment before responding.

“I’ve never met him personally, but I’ve heard Franca mention a few things.

“He resides in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. He’s a bit of a pervert and has a fondness for women, but he’s not twisted. His tastes are quite f*cking normal, and every one of his partners matches Franca’s preferences.

“He’s a merchant by trade. He owns a depot near the steam locomotive station and holds significant shares in the nearby Rist docks. He also runs a freight company and a construction firm, providing employment opportunities for many Savoyards.

“You might not know this, but when the Poison Spur Mob first gained power, they had a major conflict with the Savoie Mob. All the laborers from the depot and the dock workers took to the streets. It was like a protest!”

A considerable number of people. If armed, they could form an army… Lumian motioned for Jenna to continue.

Jenna pulled her collar up slightly.

“Franca mentioned that he’s quite amiable, even with common laborers. Don’t be deceived by his appearance. His goal is to make others drop their guard around him.

He’s cunning and highly intelligent. He enjoys playing mind games with others. Don’t provoke him, or Franca won’t be able to protect you.

“He wields significant power. It seems he’s adept at fire manipulation and possesses some mystical artifact.”

Adept at fire manipulation… A Sequence 7 Pyromaniac of the Hunter pathway? No, Franca mentioned that he’s incredibly powerful, and Franca is likely a Sequence 7 Witch of the Demoness pathway. If she made such an assessment, it’s probable that the boss of the Savoie Mob is more than just a Sequence 7…

The Poison Spur Mob’s “Black Scorpion” Roger is the boss with a boon equivalent to a Sequence 7. A Heretic Spellmaster might not necessarily defeat a Witch. Franca could easily be a mob boss herself, yet she willingly becomes this person’s mistress. I wonder if she has ulterior motives or if his strength and background truly surpass Franca’s? Lumian’s thoughts raced as he analyzed the situation.

Jenna stood up.

“You better dress like a man tomorrow. Don’t be like Baron Brignais. The Boss prefers aggressive subordinates who resemble wolfdogs.”

“Is that so…” Lumian scoffed. “I’m afraid I’ll appear overly aggressive.”

Jenna rolled her eyes.

“That’s right. You saved my life, yet there are times when I can’t help but want to slap you!

“Anyway, don’t go too far.”

She reattached her holster to her calf and headed towards the door, yawning openly.

“I’m heading back now. Sigh, I won’t be able to perform at the Salle de Gristmill for the time being.

“Why do you still live in such a lousy room?”

Although her own accommodations weren’t great either, they were still much better than Auberge du Coq Doré.

Lumian smirked once again.

“This is my turf.”

“Heh!” Jenna didn’t say anything further. She entered the dimly lit corridor and vanished from sight.

Lumian freshened up and settled into bed. Thoughts of meeting the boss of the Savoie Mob the next day gradually lulled him into sleep.

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Chapter 174 - 174 Reward

174 Reward

At half past ten in the morning on the following day, Baron Brignais rendezvoused with Lumian on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian had chosen a simple attire for the day, donning a linen shirt, a black waistcoat, and brown trousers. His cuffs were rolled up to his elbows, and he sported a wide-brimmed, brown hat.

This ensemble lent him an air of casualness, almost uncouth.

Baron Brignais observed it for a few moments but refrained from commenting. Instead, he merely reminded Lumian,

“Once we meet the Boss, it’s best to keep your words to a minimum.”

“Understood,” Lumian replied, tipping his wide-brimmed hat.

Accompanied by Lumian alone, Baron Brignais did not bring Louis and the others. He led Lumian downstairs and directed him towards a four-seater carriage awaiting them at the entrance.

Within half an hour, the carriage navigated through Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative and halted on a comparably tranquil street.

The terrain in this area stood higher than its surroundings. Detached villas, predominantly white, beige, and grayish-blue, dotted the landscape. Each boasted a front lawn and a rear garden enclosed by barbed iron fences.

Lumian’s gaze scanned the street signs, revealing the name Rue des Fontaines.

Following Baron Brignais, Lumian arrived at 11 Rue des Fontaines and watched as the baron pulled on the rope hanging beside the gated entrance.

Before long, a valet of Southern Continent origin approached and opened the iron gates.

“Monsieur Martin awaits you in his study,” the dark-skinned valet remarked, his tone laced with arrogance.

Without waiting for Baron Brignais and Lumian’s response, the valet turned on his heel and strolled along a cement path flanked by two green lawns spacious enough for three carriages.

After crossing the lawns, Lumian and Baron Brignais reached the grayish-white three-story villa.

The villa's door swung open, revealing a man in a black suit and a dark bow tie—typical butler attire—standing in the doorway.

Baron Brignais hastened his steps and greeted the man with a smile.

"Good morning, Faustino."

"Good morning, Brignais," Faustino, a man in his fifties, replied with a smile.

Baron Brignais introduced him to Lumian, saying, "This is Monsieur Martin's butler, Monsieur Faustino."

Lumian greeted Faustino in the usual manner, maintaining proper decorum.

Faustino nodded and offered no further words. Leading them through a hallway adorned with a resplendent crystal chandelier, resembling a dance floor, he guided them into a room lined with bookshelves.

Along the way, Lumian surveyed his surroundings, noting an array of oil paintings and an assortment of weapons adorning the walls—single-handed swords, broadswords, hammers, spears, and short bows. The half-tall wooden platform that ought to have showcased vases and sculptures was instead occupied by silver-white suits of armor, stirrups, breastplates, and other items.

Behind the desk, positioned beside the floor-to-ceiling windows, stood a man who measured nearly 1.8 meters in height.

His hair, typical black as found in Intis, exhibited a few silver strands near his temples. He appeared to be in his early forties, possessed strong facial features, and his slightly reddened eyes contrasted with his otherwise brown irises.

The man possessed full cheeks that contrasted with his sharply defined features. Wrinkles were conspicuously absent from his countenance, and he exuded a relatively amiable temperament. He resembled a businessman who would effortlessly flash a smile before uttering a single word.

In that moment, he wore a white shirt and a formal black suit, devoid of a bow tie or necktie.

"Good morning, Monsieur Martin," Baron Brignais's expression turned respectful.

After Lumian offered his greetings, Gardner Martin smiled and let out a sigh.

"So young, aren't you?

"I'm beginning to understand Emperor Roselle's words: Heroes often exhibit a different demeanor from others when they are young. Should I address you as

Lumian or Ciel?”

“Ciel,” Lumian replied respectfully.

As Gardner Martin strolled away from the floor-to-ceiling windows, he offered warm praise,

“In just a week, you’ve slain two Sequence 8 Beyonders and gravely injured a Sequence 9. I couldn’t have achieved such feats at your age. What’s your Sequence?”

“Sequence 8, Provoker,” Lumian responded candidly.

Gardner Martin expressed great satisfaction with Lumian’s frankness. He nodded and remarked, “What I said earlier wasn’t quite comprehensive. When I was a Sequence 8, I couldn’t have accomplished what you did. Very well. Our Savoie Mob could use an exceptional lad like you.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s reply, he proceeded to ask, “Did you find anything noteworthy on ‘Hammer’ Ait?”

This person is aware of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation? Judging by his demeanor, even if he isn’t aware of conservation, he believes that human Beyonders are akin to Beyonder creatures. They manifest Beyonder characteristics upon death, or some residual parts or ingredients that can be employed in potion brewing… Lumian contemplated for a moment and withheld nothing. From his pocket, he produced a fist-sized sphere resembling the morning clouds and the evening sun.

“I found this.”

Gardner Martin regarded it with approval.

“Excellent. Sell it to me. It holds no value for you. How about 18,000 verl d’or?”

That’s considerably higher than the 15,000 verl d’or at Mr. K’s Gathering… Lumian pretended to be unaware of the exact price of the Beyonder characteristics.

“Is it truly worth 18,000 verl d’or?”

Baron Brignais, standing beside Lumian, couldn’t fathom what peculiar object had prompted his boss to offer such a sum.

Something from ‘Hammer’ Ait? An ingredient employed for advancement? Or do Beyonders resemble Beyonder creatures? Baron Brignais entertained numerous speculations in an instant.

He suddenly regretted agreeing to surrender all of ‘Hammer’ Ait’s possessions to Ciel the previous night in order to preserve his dignity.

“Haha,” Gardner Martin boisterously chuckled. “It is indeed precious, but I’m offering a premium. Consider it your reward.”

He then turned to Butler Faustino and instructed, “Go and fetch 18,000 in cash. Avoid denominations that are too large.”

Lumian harbored no objections to selling the Pugilist Beyonder characteristic to Martin. He had intended to sell it at Mr. K’s gathering.

His hope was to amass funds to acquire a mystical item capable of countering adverse effects, compensating for his lack of mysticism means or serving as a disguise.

Taking the Pugilist Beyonder characteristic from Ciel and toying with it for a few seconds, Gardner Martin addressed Baron Brignais, “Despite Ciel’s tender age, he has already rendered significant services to our Savoie Mob and possesses remarkable strength. It is time for him to assume more substantial responsibilities.”

“Yes… You are already burdened with the usury business and the other shops on Avenue du Marché. It is no easy task. Get Ciel to assist you in managing Salle de Bal Brise. Allocate some personnel to support him, so he doesn’t have to rely solely on himself.”

Baron Brignais’s facial muscles twitched ever so slightly. He suppressed his discontent and disappointment and replied, “Very well, Monsieur Martin.”

Salle de Bal Brise was a veritable goldmine, and he was reluctant to let go of it.

If not for Monsieur Martin’s direct order, he would have chosen to hand over the Avenue du Marché business to Ciel and suggested transferring some of the henchmen from “Giant” Simon and “Blood Palm” Black.

Lumian sensed the strain in his relationship with Baron Brignais. He couldn’t deceive him as effortlessly as before.

There might even be clashes and conflicts in the future!

Gardner Martin turned to Lumian and instructed, “Take good care of Salle de Bal Brise. If you perform well, I will entrust you with more significant ventures.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Martin,” Lumian replied, lowering his head and feigning delight.

On the way back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Baron Brignais seemed to regain his composure. He engaged in occasional conversations with Lumian regarding the Savoie Mob, displaying politeness, courtesy, and refinement.

Lumian was more preoccupied with the small cloth bag brimming with 18,000 verl d’or.

With that sum, he could acquire a modest apartment in Quartier de l'Observatoire!

In the Dariège region, it was akin to owning a villa in a decent neighborhood.

Upon entering Salle de Bal Brise, Louis and the others approached Lumian.

Before they could speak, Baron Brignais drew from his mahogany pipe and announced,

"Louis, Sarkota, from this day forth, follow Ciel. He is now in charge of Salle de Bal Brise."

Louis, whose forehead bruises had mostly faded, and Sarkota, whose brownish-red hair exhibited slight natural curls, revealed expressions of shock and confusion.

They were aware that Ciel would be rewarded, but they never anticipated him taking over Salle de Bal Brise and themselves being assigned to him.

He was now a true leader of the Savoie Mob!

Ignoring his subordinates' reactions, Baron Brignais smiled at Lumian and stated, "Leave me an office on the second floor. I require it for the usury business."

"Very well," Lumian responded without objection.

After a brief handover, Baron Brignais led two thugs to address some trouble concerning the usury business. Lumian ascended to the second floor, intending to inquire about Salle de Bal Brise's operations.

Louis leaned in, speaking in a hushed tone. "Ciel, I mean, Boss, Red Boots is in your office. I wonder if she's here for you or the baron. Would you like to meet her?"

"Red Boots" Franca? Lumian nodded subtly.

"Where is my office?"

Louis hurriedly guided his new boss through the café and into the corridor on the second floor, reaching a room at the end.

"Right here." He indicated, pointing to the dark red wooden door.

Lumian nodded, grasped the handle, and pushed the door open.

The first thing that greeted his eyes were a pair of vibrant red boots, elegantly placed on a brown wooden desk.

Adorning the boots were a pair of off-white breeches, and higher still, a white blouse for ladies adorned with a multitude of embroidered flowers and vine-like patterns on the cuffs and collar. Over it, she wore a slender black and white

checkered vest.

Continuing upward, Lumian's gaze fell upon a graceful, smooth neck, followed by lips painted a delicate shade of red. A sharp, refined nose, eyebrows that arched toward the temples, and eyes sparkling with a vibrant, cheerful lake-like hue completed the picture. Her long flaxen hair was artfully tied up in a high ponytail.

Seated upon a swivel chair that had once belonged to Baron Brignais, "Red Boots" Franca nonchalantly rested her feet on the edge of the desk, as if it were her own personal territory.

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Chapter 175 - 175 Hidden Blade

175 Hidden Blade

Lumian stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him, the dark red wood closing off the outside world. He turned to Franca and asked, “Are you here to see the baron or me?”

Franca leaned back in the chair, stretching her body.

However, the swivel chair tilted slightly, leaving the ground and wobbling uncertainly.

“Care to guess why I’m here? For you or him?” Her voice cut through the air, clear and distinct, in stark contrast to her elegant appearance and demeanor. “Gardner initially wanted you to be Brignais’s deputy, to see if you were capable of handling more than just fighting. I told him then that Brignais hasn’t been very obedient lately.”

Lumian nodded, a sudden realization dawning on him. Aurore was right. A comment made in bed could play a significant role…

His confusion from earlier, on Rue des Fontaines, began to dissipate. How could the boss be so generous as to take away one of Baron Brignais’s most prized “property” and hand it over to an outsider like him?

Salle de Bal Brise was the most popular dance hall in the entire market district!

Initially, Lumian had contemplated mocking Franca’s masculine sitting posture, but the thought of her true gender made him reconsider. He clicked his tongue and remarked, “So, I should be thanking you?”

“No need for that. After all, you saved Jenna,” Franca replied, smiling as she shook her right foot on her left ankle. “I came here for two reasons. First, I wanted to assure you that I understand the distinction between kindness and animosity. I will surely repay kindness. Second, I wanted to warn you not to harbor any intentions toward Jenna.”

The latter half of her sentence carried a clear warning that she would seek revenge for any offense.

Lumian couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Are you lacking confidence? If you manage to make Jenna infatuated with you, nothing I do will change her feelings.”

Had Lumian not known about the potential gender transformation through the Demoness pathway, he might have taunted Franca, asking if her confidence solely relied on her dick. He might have mocked her insecurity and her need to caution an unrelated individual. What did she think Jenna was? Someone who would easily change her heart? Lumian could almost visualize Jenna treating Franca as a friend rather than a lover.

Gradually, Franca's smile faded. She withdrew her feet and rose from her chair.

Despite being slightly shorter than Lumian, she stood at an impressive height of almost 1.75 meters, a rarity among Intisian women.

Franca circled the desk, drawing closer to Lumian. A smirk formed on her lips as she said, "If you're in need of women, I can introduce you to some of my top dancers. And if they don't catch your fancy, how about me?"

As she spoke, she gently hooked her hand around Lumian's chin, lowering it slowly.

Lumian's heart remained calm, undisturbed like a still lake. The realization that this woman may have once been a man had extinguished any desire within him. He simply resisted, firmly gripping Franca's right hand and offering a smile.

"I'm afraid the boss would have me sleeping with the fishes at the bottom of the Srenzo River."

Changing the topic, Lumian continued, "So, you swing both ways? Men and women?"

Franca withdrew her hand, straightened up, and offered a smile.

"I used to fancy girls exclusively, but after giving it a try with a man, I realized it's not half bad. It brings about a different sensation.

"Life's too short to impose limits upon oneself. Break free from unnecessary restrictions and explore. You'll have more fun and live a truly different life."

It seems as if Franca had indeed been a man in the past. Is she now a Sequence 7 Witch? And why did her last sentence sound so familiar? In the midst of his pondering, Lumian responded to Franca,

"I don't hold any special feelings for Jenna, nor do I intend to. I have far more pressing matters to attend to."

"Very well." Franca strode toward the door.

Just as her hand reached for the handle, Lumian's memory was suddenly jogged, and he finally recalled the source of Franca's words.

It had been mentioned by Aurore in his dream!

She spoke of a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who had contemplated the idea of becoming an Assassin and had consumed the corresponding potion. However, at the Witch Sequence, he found himself in a quandary, unsure whether to undergo a gender transformation. Another member of the society had advised him, saying, “Life is short, why not give it a try?””

It was the very essence of what Franca had condensed into those words!

Lumian’s heart stirred as he gazed upon Franca’s graceful figure. He spoke in a deep, resonant voice, “Life is short, why not give it a try?”

Franca’s hand froze on the doorknob, and she stood there, as if struck by lightning.

After a few seconds, she spun around, locking her gaze with Lumian’s, her voice tinged with anxiety.

“Who are you? What’s your code name?”

This reaction… It appears my guess was correct! Lumian felt a surge of delight followed by a sinking feeling in his heart.

“I’m Muggle’s brother.”

Upon hearing Ciel accurately mention the code name of one of the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Franca breathed a sigh of relief and said,

“I’m not sure if your sister mentioned me, but my code name is Hidden Blade. I belong to the same secret organization as her. No, she must have mentioned me! Otherwise, you wouldn’t be familiar with that phrase. Damn it all, what the hell is happening!”

Lumian shut his eyes and spoke with a resolute tone, “She never mentioned your code name or identity because I chose the Hunter pathway. When she reminded me about the neighboring Demoness pathway and its potential for gender transformation, she used your experience as an example.”

“So, you do know…” Franca felt a strong urge to disappear into the depths of the sewers.

Despite having adapted to her current form and overcoming her self-imposed limitations, her newfound enjoyment with men was contingent upon her previous gender remaining a secret.

The notion that Ciel knew about her past as a man, and her penchant for intimate relations with men, ignited a dangerous thought within her.

The dead can keep secrets… The dead will forget… The dead won’t mock me…

After a few seconds, Franca let out a slow exhale and said, “It would be wise for you to forget this. If you weren’t Muggle’s brother, I would have ensured your

permanent disappearance."

At that moment, she projected her true, masculine side, casting her gaze toward the future.

"Let me enlighten you about the Hunter pathway. It, too, involves a gender change. I paid a steep price to acquire this knowledge. Unlike Demonesses, Hunters transition from women to men. It likely occurs at Sequence 4. When the time comes, I will switch paths, become a Hunter, and reclaim my male form!"

Is that so… Hunters symbolize males, while Demonesses represent females? No wonder they are neighboring paths… Lumian restrained his emotions and let out a chuckle.

"When that time arrives, how will you face the men you were once intimately involved with?"

Franca's expression turned smug as she unveiled her well-devised plan.

"I will administer them the Witch potion. If they are Beyonders unable to transition to the Demoness pathway, I will find a way to transform the characteristics of a Witch Bounded characteristic into mystical items for them to wear. And then, when the time is ripe, hehe…"

Madame, you're somewhat deranged… Lumian dared not further provoke the Red Boots.

This individual seemed capable of anything!

As he expected, Franca issued a threat, "I'll emphasize once again, it's in your best interest to forget about this matter and refrain from harboring any intentions toward Jenna. Otherwise, I will apprehend you and force the Witch potion down your throat! Though Sequence 7 may not grant the ability to switch pathways, it does make one even more dangerous. It might not result in half-crazed madness or loss of control."

Visualizing such a scenario, Lumian hastened to nod and made a solemn pledge, "You are my sister's friend. I will surely keep your secret."

Franca relaxed and inquired about Muggle, "Where is Muggle? Is she also in Trier? Is she strikingly beautiful in reality?"

Lumian fell into silence. After a few seconds, he spoke in a hoarse voice, "She passed away. You must have seen the wanted posters. In that calamity, she…"

Franca parted her lips, but no words escaped them.

She returned to Lumian's side and gently patted his shoulder, offering solace.

After a moment, Franca dabbed at the corners of her eyes and spoke, "Ever since I became a woman, it seems my tear ducts have become more active… I can't

fathom that Muggle departed from us so suddenly. Whenever we gathered, she exuded gentleness, brilliance, humor, and kindness. Though I've never laid eyes on her true form, I believe she must be incredibly beautiful…"

With a regained composure, Lumian gazed at Franca and said, "Madame Hidden Blade, I request that you keep this matter under wraps for the time being. Do not divulge it to other members of your organization. It could impact my investigation into the truth behind the catastrophe."

In a slightly nasal tone, Franca replied, "No problem."

Lumian observed Franca's shimmering eyes resembling tranquil lakes and contemplated before posing his next question, "How many encounters did you have with my sister over the past year?"

"Only once. Why do you ask?" Franca inquired, puzzled.

Lumian continued, "Did she exhibit any peculiar behavior or interact with any unusual individuals?"

"No," Franca shook her head. "It was a regular gathering where we exchanged knowledge of mysticism and traded items. We belong to different factions—she's part of the Academy, and I am affiliated with the Sanctuary. Our gatherings rarely coincide."

Lumian refrained from further inquiries. Seeking to gain something from the situation, he spoke with a mindset of extracting information, "Madame Hidden Blade, I am currently studying the grimoire left behind by my sister, but there are numerous sections that elude my understanding. Might I seek your guidance?"

"Certainly," Franca disclosed her address. "I reside in the penthouse at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Room 601. You can find me during Jenna's performances. Every evening, unless I am at Rue des Fontaines or visiting various dance halls, I will be at home. Also, please refrain from using my code name. Just refer to me as Franca."

Why does it feel like we're engaged in a clandestine affair behind Jenna's back… Lumian criticized inwardly, feeling perplexed. He voiced his puzzlement, "Franca, you possess the backing of that secret organization, and you are not lacking in strength yourself. Why did you join the mob?"

Franca grinned and playfully winked her left eye. "Secret."

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Chapter 176 - 176 Property

176 Property

After bidding farewell to Franca, Lumian led Louis and Sarkota back to the café and settled himself into Baron Brignais's usual spot.

Already awaiting him was René, the manager of Salle de Bal Brise.

In his forties, René had a gaunt face, leaving one to wonder if he was overworked or simply born that way. His light-yellow hairline was receding in a manner similar to the people from Loen.

Despite being an executive directly appointed by Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob, René treated Lumian with utmost respect and wore an ingratiating smile.

"Monsieur Ciel, would you care to learn more about the dance hall?"

"Very well." Lumian reached out to take the stack of reports from René and perused them with unwavering focus.

Standing behind him, Louis and Sarkota couldn't help but feel like they hardly knew their leader at all once more.

Lumian, a young man hailing from the countryside, possessed an understanding of complex financial statements that was far beyond their comprehension.

They would have been left feeling dizzy and yearning for sleep had they been tasked with such a feat.

Can this man both fight and possess a cultured mind? Louis diverted his gaze from the reports, which seemed to possess some kind of "supernatural effect."

René seized the opportunity to acquaint Lumian with the workings of Salle de Bal Brise.

"On weekdays, we earn a daily income ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 verl d'or. On weekends, that figure can reach as high as 5,000 verl d'or. Typically, it hovers around 4,000…

"Last year, our total income amounted to 645,425 verl d'or and 37 coppet. This year, there has been a slight increase based on current trends, but nothing significant…

“We require 12 bouncers, 4 bartenders, 6 waiters, 3 chefs, 6 kitchen helpers, 3 handymen, 3 dishwashers, 4 cleaners, 1 waiter supervisor, 3 finance staff, 3 alcohol and food procurers, and a carriage driver… Their average annual salary is 1,000 verl d’or. We also provide them with complimentary lunch and dinner, which costs us a total of 53,000 verl d’or.

“As the manager, my annual salary, along with the year-end dividend, amounts to about 7,000 verl d’or.

“As per our agreement with Red Boots, each dancer receives a base salary of 1 verl d’or per day… When they strike a deal with a guest, we take 30%… Transactions usually occur in the rooms on the upper two floors of the dance hall. If they wish to leave, they must settle the fee with the bouncer or the waiter supervisor at the door in advance…

“Wine, champagne, beer, brandy, sugar alcohol, absinthe, and various flavors of soda, along with ice and other ingredients, cost us approximately 120,000 verl d’or per year…

“We’ve already purchased this establishment, so there’s no additional rent to be paid…

“When coupled with expenses for horse care, venue maintenance, gas, tap water, singers, and the band, our annual costs sum up to around 230,000 verl d’or…

“Out of the remaining 310,000 verl d’or, the Boss will claim 100,000 verl d’or. We’ll also need 100,000 verl d’or to establish a favorable relationship with the officers at the police headquarters. Monsieur Ciel, you’re left with approximately 110,000 verl d’or. This needs to cover your personal expenses, firearm and ammunition supplies, rewards for your subordinates, as well as compensation for the victims and the injured…

“Sadly, the income of the people in the market district isn’t particularly high; otherwise, we could generate more revenue from alcohol and beverages…”

Inwardly, he couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

A mob leader with a profitable enterprise certainly rakes in substantial wealth!

According to newspapers, magazines, and the information collected by his sister Aurore, the annual salary of a minister in Intis amounted to a mere 100,000 verl d’or. Although the government provided free housing, basic household items, silverware, and two private carriages, expenses for personal servants and banquets fell on their own pockets.

Of course, Lumian had to reward his subordinates on occasion and allocate funds for compensations and ammunition in case of conflicts. However, there was no need for extravagant living, hiring servants, or hosting lavish banquets.

All in all, he earned a sum similar to that of a minister.

The only difference was that ministers didn't rely solely on their public salaries for income.

On the other hand, laborers received an annual salary of around 700 verl d'or, while maids earned approximately 480 verl d'or. Construction workers fared only slightly better, with an annual salary of 1,000 verl d'or. Skilled workers brought in a meager 2,500 verl d'or per year, while senior engineers ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 verl d'or annually.

Indeed, the "shortcut" to wealth is written within the laws themselves… No wonder Brignais couldn't bear to let go of this dance hall… Lumian recollected a comment his sister had made.

By saving money and taking care of his subordinates, preventing them from recklessly rushing into battles, he had enough left over each year to purchase a Sequence 6 potion formula and even the corresponding primary ingredients!

Once René finished speaking, Lumian nodded and posed a question, "Why provide the dancers with a base salary?"

It wasn't that he was reluctant to part with the funds, but rather out of curiosity.

"The dancers under our Savoie Mob are under the control of Red Boots. She insists on a base salary, allowing the dancers to opt-out of additional jobs. If they wish to earn less, they earn less. If they choose to starve, they starve," René explained. "Apart from Red Boots's dancers, there are also women who are controlled by figures from the usury business. In the past, Baron Brignais had authority over them all, so there wasn't any conflict. How should we coordinate matters now?"

Thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, leading him to notice the resemblances between Franca and his sister Aurore.

Could it be because they are part of the same secret organization? However, if it were Aurore, she would have approached it differently. She would have organized protests among the dancers, established an underground school to educate them, and sought alternative paths… If it were me, what would I do? After pondering for a moment, Lumian raised his gaze and addressed René, Louis, and the others.

"For now, let us maintain the current state of affairs. René, assist me in dealing with the police officers during this period. Once I acquaint myself better with our surroundings, I shall engage in fruitful discussions with them."

…

After altering the passwords of the two mechanical safes and informing Manager René of one as per the established protocol, Lumian made his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré before lunchtime.

He proceeded directly to the fifth floor and rapped on Charlie's door.

Charlie, who was enjoying a light beer with a nibble of baguette, caught sight of Ciel as soon as he opened the door.

He exclaimed happily, “Where have you been these past couple of days? You didn’t even show up at the bar for a drink.”

Lumian inquired, “There’s a job opportunity. Would you be interested?”

“What kind of job?” Charlie worriedly contemplated his diminishing savings and the bleak prospects of finding new employment.

With a smile, Lumian responded, “How about working as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise? You don’t have to join the Savoie Mob. You’ll earn 70 verl d’or per month. You can keep the tips, but be aware that folks in the market district aren’t inclined to tip unless you become a woman and are willing to engage with them intimately. Yes, there are also female patrons who seek out waiters for such purposes. You’re experienced in that domain, so there’s no need for further elaboration.”

“Salle de Bal Brise?” Charlie’s eyes widened. “Have you already gained Baron Brignais’s trust?”

To be able to arrange for someone to work as a waiter at Salle de Bal Brise without joining the Savoie Mob!

Lumian simply maintained his smile.

“I don’t need Baron Brignais’s approval. Salle de Bal Brise is now under me.”

“Huh?” Charlie questioned his own hearing.

Lumian clarified, still smiling, “After I eliminated ‘Hammer’ Ait, the Savoie Mob’s leader handed over Salle de Bal Brise to me.”

“Is that so?” Charlie had an epiphany before blurting out in astonishment, “You took down ‘Hammer’ Ait as well?”

Lumian nodded. “Don’t disclose this to anyone. I fear the police might come knocking.”

“…” Charlie was at a loss for words.

After a few seconds, he mumbled, “Perhaps those Poison Spur Mob fellows should pay a visit to the nearby cathedral and pray, see if their luck can change. Ever since you arrived in the market district, their leaders have been dropping like flies. I can’t fathom how they must be feeling now.”

“Great idea,” Lumian commended.

If the leaders of the Poison Spur Mob had the audacity to pray in the Eternal Blazing Sun or the cathedral of the God of Steam and Machinery, the mob would

cease to exist.

Of course, Lumian didn't want them to act so foolishly before Louis Lund visited again.

Charlie pondered for a moment and responded, "Alright, I'll head over to Salle de Bal Brise in the afternoon. Who should I ask for? Haha, I rarely get to visit the dance hall because I'm always short on cash. Now I can go there every day."

"Just find Manager René and let him know you're a tenant at Auberge du Coq Doré," Lumian replied simply, his gaze shifting to the side.

There were two cleaning ladies nearby. One of them appeared to be in her early fifties, but upon closer inspection, one would think she was only in her forties. She had originally possessed flaxen-colored hair, but she now wore a vibrant blond wig and had applied eye shadow and makeup. This concealed her fine wrinkles to some extent, but couldn't entirely hide her weariness.

"Who are they?" Lumian inquired of Charlie.

Charlie clicked his tongue and explained, "Don't you know? Our penny-pinching landlord has changed his ways. He no longer hires someone to clean just once a week. Now he's opted to have two cleaning ladies work every morning.

"Tell me, tell me, isn't this a miraculous turn of events? It's only slightly less fortunate than my own stroke of luck back then!"

Lumian, having just finished perusing Salle de Bal Brise's financial statements, immediately considered the salary of a cleaning lady.

Around 70 to 80 verl d'or per month.

However, that was for full-time work. This kind of half-day job would cost at most 45 verl d'or.

"Two cleaning ladies working half a day wouldn't exceed 100 verl d'or per month. Hiring someone for regular cleaning once a week costs 18 verl d'or each time. And Monsieur Ive promised to increase it to twice a week. In other words, it'll cost 150 verl d'or per month.

"How is this generous? It's simply meticulous budgeting!" Lumian scoffed.

He suspected that if it weren't for the fact that a cleaning lady couldn't finish the entire motel in half a day, no one would take on such a job. Monsieur Ive definitely wouldn't hire two.

"Is that so?" Charlie scratched his head.

His computational abilities couldn't keep up with Lumian's rapid deductions.

As the two cleaning ladies entered a vacant room to rid it of bedbugs, Lumian subtly gestured in their direction with his chin.

“Why is one of them wearing a wig and eye shadow?”

What kind of cleaning lady does that?

Charlie lowered his voice and said, “I asked about that. Her name is Elodie. She claims to have been a theater actress and says she’s used to dollying herself up like that. And she continues to do so to this day.

“No one knows if she’s telling the truth. When I worked as an attendant at H?tel du Cygne Blanc, I heard from the kitchen staff that when aging prostitutes are scorned, their only option is to take on tasks like dishwashing and cleaning…”

Lumian recollected Elodie’s appearance and surmised that she must have been quite a beauty in her youth. Whether she had been a theater actress or a woman of the streets had no bearing on her current role as a cleaning lady.

After bidding farewell to Charlie, Lumian made his way to the restaurant on the first floor for a quick meal before taking a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.

He intended to inform Mr. K that the mission had been successfully accomplished!

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Chapter 177 - 177 Proselytizing

177 Proselytizing

Before stepping onto the public carriage, Lumian made a special effort to spend six licks on purchasing a copy of the Psychic magazine, disguising himself as someone attending a gathering of mysticism enthusiasts at 19 Rue Scheer.

He worried that Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob, might secretly tail him to ascertain if something was amiss.

While he could employ some anti-tracking methods to try and shake off potential pursuers, wouldn't that raise more suspicion?

In comparison, it would be more convincing to pose as a naive country bumpkin who had recently arrived in Trier and stumbled upon the Beyonder path. Such an individual would naturally crave knowledge about mysticism, leading to the purchase of Psychic and other magazines. Occasionally attending various gatherings of mysticism enthusiasts would solidify the facade.

In truth, this tale held some merit.

The only hitch was that Mr. K, the organizer of the mysticism enthusiast gathering, had a secret organization backing him.

If Gardner Martin's men had indeed delved into their investigation, Lumian would let them confront Mr. K and witness the clash of strengths!

As the Prankster King of Cordu, Lumian always relished witnessing a spectacle unfold.

When the time arrived, he would adjust his choices based on the outcome of the battle. In any case, his overall direction would remain unchanged. He would follow the instructions of Madam Magician and infiltrate the secret organization behind Mr. K.

Inside the carriage, Lumian flipped through Psychic.

The current issue focused on the theme of "secret deeds."

Contrary to Lumian's initial instinctive interpretation, the term "deed" in the context of secret deeds did not refer to an actual "deed" but rather denoted "compatibility." It represented a method of merging one's mind with a specific hidden entity, enabling the acquisition of corresponding mental experiences and a certain amount of mystical knowledge.

Psychic's editorials stressed that this act was exceedingly perilous. Unless one could verify the trustworthiness and absence of malice in the subject of the secret deed, attempting it was strongly discouraged. It would lead to dire and severe consequences, including but not limited to mental illness, possession by evil spirits, loss of rationality, sudden death, and alterations in personality.

Ah, now it makes sense… Lumian immediately grasped some of the contents of Aurore's grimoire.

Initially, he had struggled to comprehend those passages, viewing them through the lens of a contract. However, with a change in perspective, he now roughly understood their meaning.

Lumian lowered his gaze to the Psychic magazine in his hand and silently commended it, saying,

It's more useful than I anticipated. I had thought it was all concocted to deceive enthusiasts of mysticism.

Yes, although there are numerous errors in common sense that suggest it wasn't written by someone who truly ventured into the Beyonder world and conducted extensive research, their explanations of certain concepts are rather advanced. They come close to the correct answer, and some even enlighten me…

Amidst his praise, he muttered, Considering that Mr. K resides beneath the headquarters of Psychic, could there truly be Beyonders among the editorial staff and contributing authors of these mysticism magazines?

Did they intentionally write an accurate article first and then deliberately alter many concepts and common knowledge to something incorrect?

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian inwardly hissed.

From this vantage point, the editors of this issue aren't instructing the correct secret deed ritual. Instead, they are cautioning those who attempt secret deeds without discretion!

No, it's not merely without discretion. It's more plausible that it was purposefully guided by someone with malicious intentions…

At that moment, Lumian revisited Psychic, no longer focusing on the specific words.

He even sensed that it was brimming with warnings written in blood-red ink: "Cease! Refrain from engaging in any further secret deed rituals!"

The mysterious world is truly fraught with peril… Lumian closed his eyes and sighed deeply, touched by emotions.

The longer he immersed himself in the field of mysticism, the more he comprehended his sister's helplessness and struggle.

He closed Psychic, a magazine two licks cheaper than the average, and directed his gaze out of the carriage window.

Upon reaching Rue Scheer in Avenue du Boulevard, Lumian executed his customary anti-tracking measures, showcasing his Hunter instincts.

He then entered Psychic's headquarters and knocked on the door of Room 103 using the distinctive pattern of three-long, two-short, and one-long knock.

As before, he was led to the basement and encountered Mr. K.

Mr. K still wore a voluminous black robe with an oversized hood, rendering his face concealed within shadows.

Seated in the crimson-backed chair, he gazed at Lumian for a few seconds before speaking in a low, raspy voice, "What brings you here this time?"

"Mr. K, I have fulfilled the mission you assigned me and have become a leader in the Savoie Mob of the market district. I now oversee Salle de Bal Brise and Auberge du Coq Doré," Lumian said with a smile.

Mr. K offered a slight nod.

"Excellent. I like your way of doing things.

"What you must do next is earn Gardner Martin's trust and secure his genuine recognition."

This time, Mr. K omitted the words "reward" or "mission." Instead, he issued a direct command, treating Lumian as if he were already his subordinate.

Earning the Boss's trust? Lumian was momentarily taken aback, followed by intense bewilderment and unease.

He recalled vividly that when Mr. K assigned the mission, he hadn't specified joining the Savoie Mob. He had used the word "any"!

Yet now, the subsequent task was to be truly acknowledged by the boss of the Savoie Mob!

If I hadn't chosen Baron Brignais and chose another mob, what kind of mission would Mr. K have assigned me today?

Or was he utterly convinced that I would join the Savoie Mob?

What makes him so certain?

Thoughts swirled in Lumian's mind, reminding him of recent events

Baron Brignais dispatched me to handle a leader from the Poison Spur Mob after I eliminated the pervert and obtained the canister of sedatives, putting it to good use…

Isn't this too much of a coincidence?

There are other similar occurrences…

Every so often, I sense someone's gaze upon me from the shadows nearby, yet I perceive nothing…

Could all of this have been orchestrated by Mr. K?

If I had not chosen the Savoie Mob, would I have been "arranged" to join the Savoie Mob following a series of incidents?

The more Lumian pondered, the more a sense of dread overcame him.

When Lumian looked at Mr. K again, the notion of treating him as a cash cow vanished from his mind.

Perhaps, apart from Madam Magician and a few others, this might be the most powerful Beyonder he had ever encountered!

Unknowingly, it compelled him to comply with the other party's desires!

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian lowered his head and said, "Yes, Mr. K."

He assumed the demeanor of a subordinate.

Meanwhile, he couldn't help but think of "Red Boots" Franca.

This member of the secret organization, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, possessed both a background and strength, yet she aspired to become the mistress of a mob boss. Clearly, she harbored ulterior motives.

Is her objective also to get close to Gardner Martin? Is she involved in something significant or a crucial secret? Lumian attempted to make an educated guess.

Mr. K nodded in satisfaction.

"I'm pleased to see you know your place. Don't worry, I won't be stingy with the rewards.

"Have you not prayed in any cathedral recently?"

He changed the subject.

“I’m a wanted criminal!” Lumian recalled Madam Magician’s warning and retorted angrily, “Besides, those deities won’t save us at all!”

Mr. K chuckled.

“It’s not that they won’t, but they can’t. Their power cannot envelop all believers and assist everyone during times of calamity.

“There are numerous reasons, but to put it succinctly, there is only one:

“Weakness is an inherent sin.

“Are you curious about the Lord I believe in? He embodies the truth of this world. He is supreme. His divine grace flows abundantly like the sea. He created everything and shall annihilate everything. He is power incarnate, as are we.”

Observing Lumian’s silence, Mr. K didn’t press further.

“You need not answer me now. Ponder carefully during this period. Reflect on who can save us and offer protection in this increasingly perilous and deranged world.

“Once you have affirmed your faith in Him, you will genuinely become one of us. It won’t be long before your strength significantly improves.”

“I shall consider it deeply,” Lumian replied in a hushed tone.

Mr. K then inquired, “Is there anything else?”

Having adjusted his mindset, Lumian asked, with the intention of not missing out on anything by asking,”In the course of fulfilling the mission, if I encounter danger, may I employ your finger? How should I utilize it?”

Mr. K nodded and responded, “Just take it out.”

In other words, it could be employed.

“If I use it, how should I deal with the threat from Susanna Mattise in the future?” Lumian probed further.

Mr. K fell silent for a few seconds.

“After you employ that finger, return to me here. I shall provide you with another one.”

Indeed, your fingers are consumables… Lumian pondered for a moment and said, “I sold ‘Hammer’ Ait’s Beyonder characteristic to Gardner Martin for 18,000 verl d’or. I wish to purchase a Sealed Artifact that can enhance my mystical abilities or aid me in better disguising myself. Do you have any such items here, Mr. K?”

Mr. K didn’t offer an immediate response, as if he were contemplating a suitable candidate.

After a while, he said to Lumian, “Come here and make your selection on Saturday night.”

Lumian beamed.

“Thank you, Mr. K.”

It felt reassuring to have the support of an organization, even if he was only an unofficial member.

…

After arriving at Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, Lumian carefully stowed Mr. K’s finger in Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré. His next destination was Salle de Bal Brise, where he intended to locate an unoccupied room. There, he would summon the messenger of Madam Magician to relay the progress of his mission. Lumian hoped to receive valuable feedback from her, particularly regarding how Mr. K had permitted these events to unfold with an uncanny degree of coincidence.

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Chapter 178 - 178 The Messenger's Response

178 The Messenger's Response

Evening, Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Lumian made his way to the entrance. Just as he reached the door, he was greeted by two mobsters standing guard.

"Good evening, Boss."

Lumian, still donned in a crisp white shirt, a black vest, and rolled-up cuffs, acknowledged them with a smile and a nod.

Louis and Sarkota had been eagerly awaiting the return of their new leader. Spotting Lumian entering the dance hall, they swiftly abandoned their positions at the bar counter and forced smiles on their faces.

"Boss, why don't you let us accompany you? It's not safe to be unprotected like this!" Louis expressed his loyalty with concern.

Lumian chuckled in amusement and replied, "You two? Protecting me?"

"I worry that if anything were to happen, you both would end up beaten to a pulp. I'd have to compensate your loved ones."

Louis smiled sheepishly.

"I know you're formidable, Boss, and you can handle 'Hammer' Ait and 'Wolf' Margot on your own. But isn't there a saying that goes, 'Two fists can't fight four hands'? Besides, we all carry guns, and our aim isn't too shabby."

Two fists can't fight four hands? Lumian thought to himself. Wasn't that something Emperor Roselle once said? When did it become a saying? Aurore had always suspected that many vulgarities originated from Emperor Roselle, but nobody had ever confirmed it… Lumian glanced at Louis, who appeared tough but had a submissive demeanor, and Sarkota, with his curly brown hair and full lips. He nodded slightly and responded, "When I instruct you to follow, you may do so. When I don't, keep an eye on the dance hall. If anyone dares to cause trouble, shoot them."

"Right, where can I find a shooting range?"

“There’s one in the basement of the dance hall,” Louis pointed downwards, indicating his feet. “The other leaders also come there to practice their shooting skills, but they have to bring their own ammunition.”

“Excellent.” Lumian nodded in satisfaction.

He urgently needed to improve his marksmanship, as he lacked effective long-range attacks.

Louis asked again, “Boss, the environment at Auberge du Coq Doré is dreadful. Are you planning to relocate to the dance hall? There are several rooms on the second floor for you to choose from. Or do you intend to stay in the temporary rest area previously used by Baron Brignais?”

Louis displayed his willingness, recognizing that both he and Sarkota had once been trusted aides of Baron Brignais. If they failed to earn the trust of the new leader, they might be relegated to mere bouncers at the entrance. Their status would plummet, and they would be at the mercy of the members of the Savoie Mob, with whom they had never gotten along. Not only would their income suffer, but they would also face significant bullying.

Lumian pondered for a moment before responding, “Show me the rooms.”

This location was ideal for the ritual to summon Madam Magician’s messenger.

Lumian had no plans to check out of Auberge du Coq Doré anytime soon. His strategy involved selecting a room on the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise and Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré as his nightly resting places after dismissing Louis and Sarkota. This increased his chances of being attacked under the cover of darkness. Occasionally, he would also consider his rented safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Lumian sensed that the Poison Spur Mob wouldn’t let him off easily. He had eliminated three leaders consecutively and had deliberately provoked them. Once the authorities let their guard down a little, the likelihood of retaliation would be high. Lumian was confident that the other side had been provoked, as his potion had been further digested. In another month or two, he might even consider advancing to Pyromaniac.

Lumian didn’t worry too much about being secretly attacked by “Black Scorpion” Roger and the other leaders of the Poison Spur Mob. With Mr. K’s finger, he stood a good chance of defending himself, even against Susanna Mattise, who was equivalent to a Sequence 5 Beyonder, let alone “Black Scorpion” Roger and the others who had not yet become Sowers.

Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian made his way through the café and entered the corridor. After scanning the area, he pointed to a room closer to his office and declared, “I’ll take this one.”

The room boasted classical furniture, a four-piece set of dark red velvet, and a cushioned recliner.

“Boss, should we replace these fabric items with new ones?” Louis ingratiatingly inquired.

Sarkota, ever quiet in comparison, stood by his side.

“No need,” Lumian replied, finding an excuse. He then assigned his two bodyguards to watch over the door leading from the café to the second-floor corridor. Locking the door, he settled himself at a wide wooden table near the window to write a letter to Madam Magician.

In the letter, he emphasized that he had completed Mr. K’s mission and earned his trust, even undergoing proselytization. He mentioned the opportunity to join the secret organization supporting Mr. K and inquired about the necessity of praying to Mr. K’s lord, as well as the potential consequences of being monitored by that entity. Finally, he highlighted his recent actions and expressed his unease over certain coincidences.

Once he neatly folded the letter, Lumian arranged the altar and conjured a wall of spirituality.

With the summoning ritual completed, he fixed his gaze upon the blue flame of the candle and waited in the chilling and eerie environment.

Before long, a doll-like figure, the size of an arm, materialized above the fire.

Clad in a delicate golden dress, the figure surveyed the area with unfocused, light-blue eyes. Raising its right hand, it delicately pinched its petite, pale-white nose.

“It stinks! It stinks! This place isn’t as clean as the last one!”

“Isn’t this place supposed to be clean?” Lumian exclaimed, scanning his surroundings in surprise. “There are no bedbugs, and it’s just been cleaned.”

The messenger continued to wrinkle its nose, its voice ethereal and illusory as it spoke.

“There are old bones buried beneath the ground!

“They’re foul, putrid, and repulsive!”

With those words, the blond “doll” snatched the letter and vanished instantly.

Clearly, it had no intention of staying a moment longer!

Old bones underground? Lumian repeated the messenger’s words, perplexed.

He remembered that Salle de Bal Brise had been erected upon a cemetery belonging to a cathedral, and the bodies and ashes had been relocated to the catacombs.

Even after the Savoie Mob had acquired the building, there remained an eerie atmosphere. Concerned that some bones might have been left behind deep beneath the ground, they had commissioned a spherical statue crafted from white skulls and placed it at the entrance, accompanied by an engraved inscription.

The messenger's reaction hinted that there truly were ancient remains interred underground.

When the cathedral had moved the remains and ashes from the original cemetery to the catacombs, they likely hadn't intentionally left anything behind, unless they had failed to discover it or were unaware… Could it be that there is a hidden tomb beneath the original cemetery, dating back to the Fourth Epoch? Is that why the messenger reacted so strongly? Well, for now, let's set aside the matter of the old bones underground. After all, nothing untoward has occurred at Salle de Bal Brise throughout these years. It's highly unlikely that anything would go awry the moment I set foot here, right? Lumian mused, concluding the ritual and tidying up the altar.

He settled into the cushioned recliner, gently rocking back and forth, awaiting Madam Magician's response.

Time passed, and the sky darkened completely. Lumian contemplated whether he should have Louis and the others bring dinner to his room or indulge in it at the café or the bar counter.

Suddenly, a stack of papers fell from above, landing on his lap.

This time, the "doll" messenger didn't even reveal itself, clearly displaying its profound aversion to the overall "environment" of Salle de Bal Brise.

In the future, I'll summon it at Auberge du Coq Doré or that safe house… Lumian unfolded the letter and read it attentively.

"Excellent job. It seems you have gained Mr. K's admiration and initial approval.

"From now on, simply follow his instructions. When the need arises, I will inform you of the true objective in advance.

"You can pretend to believe in the entity mentioned by Mr. K. After all, you already bear traces of two entities. Adding another one won't be an issue. I'm just concerned it might get a bit crowded.

"Haha, the previous statement was a jest. The real solution is as follows:

"You can feign belief, but whenever you meet Mr. K and engage in prayer, beseech my lord for the protection of an angel. You should have learned the

corresponding ritualistic magic, correct? If not, consult your sister's grimoires.

"Usually, refrain from invoking the honorific name of that individual, even if the order has been disrupted. Unless you are certain you have received the angel's protection.

"I understand that the more one tries to suppress certain memories, the more they tend to resurface. During your next therapy session, you can attempt seeking assistance from your psychiatrist. In other words, you must postpone the matter of becoming a false believer until after the upcoming treatment.

"As for coincidences, they often have multiple factors intertwined in various things.

"Firstly, the corruption sealed within your body stems from an entity known as Inevitability. Clearly, Inevitability is linked to fate. It will subtly disrupt your destiny, leading you to encounter specific individuals and events that you are 'destined' to come across.

"Secondly, it is highly likely that Mr. K has made arrangements to station someone in the shadows, observing you and providing the mob leaders with subtle psychological cues. This leads me to suspect that he is either a Sequence 6 Hypnotist or a Sequence 5 Dreamwalker from the Spectator path. However, based on your earlier description, he also possesses the powers of a Notary. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that he is a Shepherd. Shepherds are Sequence 5 Beyonders from the Secrets Suppliant path, and they serve the entity in whom Mr. K believes.

"Shepherds can graze upon the souls and characteristics of other Beyonders, enabling them to wield their abilities. This renders every Shepherd incredibly formidable, standing at the pinnacle of Mid-Sequence Beyonders.

"Thirdly, this stems from the law of convergence and my previous hypothesis of repulsion. Trust me, I won't be surprised that you will encounter more believers of evil gods, Hunters, and Demonesses in a short span of time.

"Stay diligent, Seven of Wands."

Shepherd? That sounds incredibly powerful… I have already encountered another Hunter and two Demonesses… Lumian ignited Madam Magician's response by channeling his spirituality.

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Chapter 179 - 179 Feast

179 Feast

As Lumian gazed at the smoldering remnants of the paper, memories of Mr. K's relentless pressure flooded his mind.

So a Shepherd's essence lies in Grazing. They graze upon the souls and characteristics of other Beyonders or Beyonder creatures to harness their abilities…

Thus, a seasoned Shepherd is truly unparalleled. They excel in close combat, long-range attacks, and a multitude of mystical techniques…

In fact, a Contractee is somewhat like a simplified version of a Shepherd. Each contract is limited to a single ability. When one's Sequence is low, the number of contracts is severely restricted. At most, it might reach five, but often it doesn't exceed three. If one fails to choose their abilities wisely, they may struggle to defeat an ordinary person armed with a gun. It's not comparable to a Shepherd's power, where Grazing bestows all abilities, undiminished…

Of course, at the level of the padre, signing ten or twenty contracts becomes a different experience. Furthermore, contracts often target beings from the spirit world with a wide array of peculiar abilities. Beyonders encountering them for the first time will find it challenging to adapt…

The more Lumian pondered, the more dread Mr. K instilled in him.

Suppressing his thoughts, Lumian stood up and let out an inward sigh.

No wonder Madam Magician believes Mr. K can withstand Susanna Mattise—an evil spirit…

Leaving the room, Lumian approached Louis and Sarkota with composure and uttered, "Have the kitchen prepare dinner."

"Boss, what would you like to eat?" Louis inquired before Sarkota could speak.

Lumian couldn't recall the menu at Salle de Bal Brise's attached café. He pondered for a moment and replied, "Bring me a set meal. Join me."

"Alright." Louis signaled Sarkota to inform the café attendant.

Lumian settled at Baron Brignais's favored table and picked up the day's newspaper.

The Trier Gazette adorned the top, followed by The Reformer Daily, People's Voice, Action News, Intis Daily, Friends of the People, and other prominent newspapers.

Lumian couldn't resist turning his head, a hint of amusement in his voice as he asked Louis,

"Is that what Brignais typically reads?"

A mobster concerned about national affairs?

Louis glanced at Sarkota on the other side and replied with a smile, "He doesn't read such things. He only insists that we avoid offending reporters and newspapers. If possible, we should subscribe to influential newspapers. Occasionally, he'll spend money to place advertisements for Salle de Bal Brise, boasting of the presence of captivating dancers here.

"He usually reads the three newspapers and magazines at the bottom."

Avoiding conflicts with newspapers and reporters… That makes sense. If the Trier Gazette publishes news of a significant mob presence in the market district, the Savoie Mob would be doomed the next day. Those old men still value their reputation… Lumian gained a bit more understanding.

He then retrieved the newspapers and magazines from the bottom.

Isn't this more interesting than The Reformer Daily and Action News? Lumian picked up Novel Weekly and delved into the latest serialized story.

Casually, he inquired, "Where do the funds and advertising fees for these newspapers come from?"

Louis pondered for a moment, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead, but he couldn't provide an answer. Just then, Sarkota chimed in, "It's deducted from the 100,000 verl d'or we set aside for cultivating ties with the police."

Lumian nodded approvingly, satisfied that it wouldn't hinder his gains as the new leader of the Savoie Mob!

Before long, the café attendant arrived with their food.

Onion minced pigeon, smoked rock crab, hot bamboo chicken pie, stewed mutton brain, stewed veal slices, grilled oysters with vanilla, two salads, scarlet cheese, grilled almond sauce, a glass of red, white, and blue liqueur, and a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

The fragrant aromas mingled together, wafting into Lumian's nostrils and causing his mouth to water even more.

Just as expected from Trier. Even an ordinary café's set meal offers such a variety of dishes. If this were Loen, I'd be limited to choosing between pan-fried steak or stewed peas with tender mutton… Lumian, being a pure Intisian, mockingly compared Loen's cuisine based on his impressions from various newspapers, magazines, and folk jokes.

He lifted the glass of tricolor liqueur and took a sip, then pointed to the armchairs on either side of the table, saying, "Let's eat together."

Louis bowed slightly and replied with a smile, "Boss, we'll take turns eating after you finish."

Lumian didn't insist and savored his first feast since arriving in Trier—and it was on the house.

It had to be said that the chefs at Salle de Bal Brise were truly skilled. Lumian nodded repeatedly as he enjoyed his meal.

Among the dishes, he found the mutton brain most delightful. Skillfully infused with several spices, the fishy and gamey flavors of the brain were cleverly balanced, leaving behind a delicate texture akin to Roselle tofu, accompanied by a rich and enticing fragrance.

He finished the glass of red, white, and blue liqueur and one-third of the bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. Then, he gestured for Louis and Sarkota to take their turns.

Lumian picked up Novel Weekly and Ghost Face magazines, ready to delve into their contents.

In the pages of Ghost Face, Lumian's eyes fell upon a familiar name: DuVar.

The proprietor of the restaurant renowned for inventing DuVar's broth had amassed a fortune and relocated to Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra.

An intriguing anecdote caught Lumian's attention within the Ghost Face pages:

DuVar's infatuation with Perle, a stage actress from Loen and a Trier courtesan, had cost him a fortune. The tale recounted a banquet held at Perle's private residence, where she lay naked on an enormous silver platter, served by attendants, in the presence of over a dozen guests.

This shattered DuVar's heart. He had even attempted suicide to no avail.

Lumian couldn't decide whether to sigh at the Trieriens' tendency to exaggerate or to jest at the Loenese for not being as conservative as they seemed. It appeared that the latter adapted swiftly in Intis, or perhaps he should mock DuVar for his unblemished innocence despite being a Trierien in his forties.

At times, Lumian couldn't help but wonder if these behaviors stemmed from the influence of a Beyonder's nature or if the followers of the malevolent god couldn't

rein in their impulses.

Naturally, had it not been for the shared inclinations among the Trieriens and the fact that many things posed no issues, these individuals would have been exposed long ago.

After Louis and Sarkota had finished their meal, Lumian led them down to the first floor.

The dance hall buzzed with activity in the evening. Jenna stood upon the wooden stage, her voice carrying a melodious tune accompanied by the band. Couples below embraced one another, twirling around the floor.

Lumian cast a fleeting glance at the scene before redirecting his gaze and striding toward the exit.

“Boss, where are we headed?” Louis inquired.

Lumian chuckled.

“Am I the boss or are you? Do I need to report my whereabouts to you?”

Louis’s expression froze. He glanced at the silent Sarkota and suddenly felt that emulating his composure wasn’t a bad idea.

“I-I’m merely concerned about our next course of action,” he asserted.

As Lumian made his way out of the dance hall, amidst greetings from the bouncers, he smiled and replied, “I will inform you when there is a need for you to know.”

He returned to Auberge du Coq Doré but veered away from Room 207, where he had intended to retrieve Mr. K’s finger and his revolver. Instead, he ventured into the underground bar.

Before Lumian could assess the situation, Charlie’s voice reached his ears, brimming with enthusiasm.

“Have you heard the news? Ciel now goes by the nickname ‘Lion’ Ciel!

“‘Little Minx’ Jenna came up with it. Have you laid eyes on her? I doubt you’ve ever seen a woman as stunning as her. She possesses an alluring figure and a face that could bewitch anyone. When she sings, everyone yearns to abandon their faith for her. And she took a liking to Ciel and invited him to dance. They were inseparable, grinding each other! Oh, the dance hall was dimly lit. You can well imagine what transpired…”

“…” Lumian suddenly felt like he had become the protagonist of a news story in Ghost Face.

Louis and Sarkota, standing behind him, felt both embarrassed and concerned for their boss.

They were embarrassed that the person at the small round table might be boasting on their boss's behalf. They were worried that if it were true, their boss would be making "Red Boots" Franca a cuckold. In that case, they would be in serious trouble. Franca not only held considerable power but was also the mistress of their big boss!

Charlie, holding a beer, caught sight of Lumian, and his smile froze.

He hopped off the small round table and approached Lumian, coughing before speaking.

"Hey, Ciel, would you mind if I shared some details about your romantic entanglement?"

Instead of answering, Lumian asked, "How did you find out?"

Charlie grinned. "Many people know; it spread from the Salle de Gristmill."

In other words, the Poison Spur Mob is aware that I danced with Jenna twice before assassinating "Hammer" Ait? That's true. I only disguised myself back then, without even changing my hair color. I even provoked those around me. In hindsight, coupled with "Hammer" Ait's demise, they will surely recognize me… As Red Boots' mistress, Jenna may also become a target for their vengeance. There's no need to be overly concerned, though. She is protected by Red Boots. As a seasoned Beyonder and a formidable Demoness, Franca won't be careless in such matters… Lumian nodded, understanding the situation.

He smiled at Charlie and said, "Feel free to share."

The more the news spread, the more it would attract Red Boots' attention, deterring any potential reprisal from the Poison Spur Mob.

Lumian asked Charlie, "Why didn't you go to Salle de Bal Brise?"

Charlie forced a smile and replied, "The manager, René, wants me to start officially tomorrow. He offered me 80 verl d'or per month."

As they conversed, Lumian noticed his neighbor sitting at the bar counter.

The abject author Gabriel.

He still sported disheveled, greasy brown hair, large black-framed glasses, a faded linen shirt, and black dungarees.

Lumian bid farewell to Charlie and approached Gabriel, asking, "What's the matter?"

Gabriel, sipping on a glass of light-green absinthe, glanced at him and smiled bitterly.

“My script was rejected. Those managers didn’t even bother reading it!

“I’ve submitted it to dozens of theaters, but no one is willing to give it a chance.”

Dozens of theaters… Lumian’s heart stirred as he casually inquired, “Did you send your script to Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons in our market district?”

“Yes,” Gabriel sighed. “Their manager turned me down too. He mentioned that they write their own scripts or commission custom ones.”

Lumian took a seat and asked, “Who is their manager?”

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Chapter 180 - 180 Lazy

180 Lazy

Gabriel took a sip of absinthe and spoke, “Maipú Meyer. He’s a theater manager with big ambitions. He aims to make Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons the most renowned theater in Trier. His ultimate goal is to be awarded the prestigious Intis Legion of Honor medal.”

The Intis Legion of Honor medal originated during the time of Emperor Roselle when he was still a Consul. It was created to replace the nobility system of the old royal family. However, when Roselle declared himself Caesar, the medal was abolished, and titles like dukes, counts, barons, and knights were reintroduced.

Later, when the Intis Republic was established, the Legion of Honor Medal was reinstated. It was given to both military personnel and civilians who made remarkable contributions to the Republic. It wasn’t limited to the military but included individuals from various industries. It was the highest honor in the current Intis Republic and being a recipient equated to being a knight from the past.

In the past, painters, authors, actors, journalists, and sculptors had been honored with the Intis Legion of Honor medal, serving as inspirations for future generations.

In the stories he crafted in his dream, he deceived the villagers of Cordu by claiming that Aurore was headed to Trier to receive the Legion of Honor medal. It wasn’t entirely implausible. If Aurore could become Intis’s renowned Fors Wall and the best-selling author on the Northern Continent, gaining recognition from L’Institut de Intis for her artistic achievements, she might have a genuine chance at obtaining the Legion of Honor medal.

Lumian chuckled and remarked, “If a person lacks dreams, they’re no different from salted fish.” He found Maipú Meyer, the theater manager, to be quite ordinary.

This led him to believe that the issues with Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons extended beyond the majority of the people. There were only a few individuals closely associated with the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, Monsieur Ive, who were peculiar.

After conversing with Gabriel for a while, Lumian guided Louis and Sarkota to the second floor and asked them to wait outside Room 207.

He closed the door behind him, took off his holster from under his left armpit, and stashed away the bullet bag. Then, he put on a dark jacket.

Without delay, Lumian retrieved Mr. K's finger from beneath the pillow and slipped it into his right pocket.

As for Fallen Mercury, the dagger from Hedsey, the awakening gas, and the unidentified liquid, he always carried them with him. However, the bayonet served no immediate purpose, so he left it in a drawer of the wooden table.

Once he completed these actions, Lumian bent down and retrieved a brown suitcase from under the bed. He carefully placed Aurore's grimoires inside.

Given his altered identity and the increased hostility from the Poison Spur Mob, he felt the need to secure these grimoires in a safer and more secluded location—the rented safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

To Lumian, these items held precious clues and knowledge left behind by Aurore. They also possessed an irreplaceable sentimental value that required protection.

As for his daily studies, he would pre-copy a portion of the material and leave it at Auberge du Coq Doré or Salle de Bal Brise. Once he mastered it and ensured there were no issues, he would copy a few more pages at the safe house.

After turning down Louis's offer to assist with his luggage, Lumian made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise and entered a room near the office.

He retrieved the grimoire he had been perusing recently and laid it out on the desk. Taking hold of a dark-red fountain pen, he commenced copying its contents onto a thick stack of white paper.

As he transcribed, Lumian found the task dreadfully dull. Ideas on how to avoid the monotony began to creep into his mind.

Soon enough, an idea struck him.

Why not summon that rabbit-shaped creature from the spirit world, the one who had previously written the report for him, and have it copy his notebook?

Though that creature was dim-witted and lacking in intellect, it proved obedient. It possessed a remarkable speed for copying and could imitate the original handwriting… In that case, all I need to do is provide spirituality while I indulge in reading newspapers and magazines, waiting for my homework to be completed. No, not homework… rather, copying notes… Lumian pondered momentarily before setting his fountain pen down and preparing for the summoning ritual.

Back in Cordu, upon finishing his sister's daily assignments, Lumian often contemplated ways to slack off.

He had been teaching Reimund, Ava, and the others to comprehend words, hoping they could assist him with his homework as they improved.

Alas, the disparity in knowledge between them was too vast. It couldn't be bridged without several years of effort.

Before long, Lumian arranged the altar, consecrated the ritual silver dagger, and erected a wall of spirituality.

As the fragrance of citrus and lavender wafted through the air, he gazed at the candle flame's yellow hue and uttered in ancient Hermes:

"I!"

In the next second, Lumian switched to Hermes.

"I summon in my name:

"Spirit wandering in the void, a friendly creature that can be communicated with, weakling who can write Intisian…"

The candle flame swiftly transformed into a deep shade of green, expanding to the size of a human head.

Completing the remaining incantation, Lumian witnessed the emergence of a translucent and hazy figure from within the candle flame.

Standing at nearly 1.9 meters tall, it possessed the head of an ox atop a human body, garbed in brown fur clothing.

Not the rabbit… That's right. There must be numerous spirit world creatures that fit the description of my summoning incantation. The one who responds to the summons is entirely random… Lumian experienced a mix of disappointment and anticipation as he pointed toward the grimoire.

"Copy it for me."

The ethereal "minotaur" nodded faintly.

"Alright."

Without delay, it seated itself, picked up the dark-red fountain pen, and commenced copying Aurore's grimoire.

Not bad at all, much more intelligent than that silly rabbit… Lumian thought, his delight evident.

Just as he was about to settle into the recliner and peruse the newspapers and magazines, an unsettling feeling washed over him.

Isn’t the “minotaur” too slow? More than ten seconds have passed, and it hasn’t even copied a word!

No, in fact, it had only written two letters!

“Can you work any faster?” Lumian probed.

“This is already my fastest pace,” the “minotaur” responded truthfully.

“…” Lumian was at a loss for words.

It was even worse than the silly rabbit!

That creature, at the very least, functioned like a mystical typewriter. It could complete a full page of copying in less than a minute!

Lumian unconsciously considered ending the ritual and dismissing the “minotaur” before summoning another spirit world creature. However, knowing that the subsequent ones were likely to be equally peculiar, he abandoned the idea in weariness.

By the time the summoning ritual naturally came to an end, the “minotaur” had managed to copy only half a page.

Lumian rubbed his temples and made up his mind to do it himself.

After transcribing three pages, he heard a knock on the door.

“What’s the matter?” Lumian closed his notebook, set aside his fountain pen, and walked toward the door.

It was Louis outside.

In his rugged guise, he lowered his voice and said, “Boss, ‘Giant’ Simon is here.”

What could he want? Lumian recalled that “Giant” Simon was a leader of the Savoie Mob, overseeing a number of dance halls and bars on Rue du Rossignol. He was suspected to be a Beyonder of the Warrior pathway, with a high likelihood of being a Sequence 8 Beyonder.

Louis simply shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

Lumian inquired, “What did he discuss with Brignais last time? It didn’t seem pleasant.”

Louis elaborated, “‘Giant’ Simon has always held a grudge against the baron because he controls Salle de Bal Brise.”

He instinctively used the term “baron.”

Observing that Lumian didn’t take offense, Louis continued, “Salle de Bal Brise’s profits surpass those of all his dance halls and bars combined. He even has a casino in his bar!

“The last time he approached the baron, he hoped that the baron would prevent some of the more attractive dancers from coming here and instead have them transferred to Rue du Rossignol. The baron replied, ‘Red Boots is in charge of assigning the dancers. I have no objections if you discuss it with her.’

“The prices on Rue du Rossignol are very low. Beautiful dancers are reluctant to work there.”

Lumian recollected Charlie mentioning that one could find inexpensive pussies on Rue du Rossignol for as little as 52 coppet, which amounted to just half a verl d’or. On the other hand, at Salle de Bal Brise, if the dancers encountered generous patrons, they could charge up to 10 verl d’or. Typically, they fetched anywhere between 3 to 5 verl d’or.

This was despite the relatively low income in the market district. If it were Rue de la Muraille in the Red Princess district, an above-average-looking woman would cost dozens of verl d’or.

Is “Giant” Simon envious of my control over Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian nodded subtly, his brows furrowing in puzzlement, and he asked, “There’s something I find rather perplexing. Why are Salle de Bal Brise’s profits so substantial?”

Louis grinned.

“Most of our alcohol comes from ‘Rat’ Christo. It’s tax-free and incredibly cheap.

“Moreover, we don’t have to pay any rent.”

“Rat” Christo who is in charge of the smuggling business? Lumian grasped the general reasoning behind it.

He exited the room, strolled along the corridor, and entered the café.

“Giant” Simon, still clad in a snug black formal suit, had his light-yellow hair tightly plastered to his scalp.

He set his wide-brimmed round hat on the table and positioned himself by the window, puffing on a cigarette.

The mobsters trailing behind him dispersed, engaging in an intense standoff with Sarkota and the others at Salle de Bal Brise from a distance.

Spotting Lumian approaching, Simon crushed the cigarette in his hand and put on a feigned wide smile.

“Well, well, Ciel, you’ve already gained the Boss’s approval and managed to get to run Salle de Bal Brise. Why didn’t you treat us brothers to a drink?”

As Simon spoke, he strode toward Lumian.

At over 1.9 meters in height, Lumian, who was already standing at 1.8 meters, appeared rather short.

Lumian gazed up at Simon’s prominent nose and pockmarked face, returning the smile.

“I have some sort of social phobia, so I couldn’t bring myself to invite you guys.

“Hey, you’re quite tall. Just as one would expect from a ‘Giant.’ You’re even taller than ‘Hammer’ Ait.”

His words conveyed a message of maintaining their respective territories. If you don’t provoke me, I won’t provoke you. Otherwise, I’m capable of killing you, just like the Sequence 8 Warrior, ‘Hammer’ Ait.

“Giant” Simon didn’t comprehend the meaning behind the first sentence, but he discerned the provocation in the latter.

His face darkened as a result, simultaneously dispelling his disdain for “Lion” Ciel.

This wasn’t merely a brawny man. Smiles and pleasantries wouldn’t get him far!

Simon gestured toward the table where Baron Brignais often sat.

“I need to discuss something with you.”

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Chapter 181 - 181 The Loyal Ciel

181 The Loyal Ciel

Lumian settled back into his seat, taking a casual stance. His gaze locked onto "Giant" Simon as he inquired, "And what's the matter?"

"Giant" Simon's cast his light-blue eyes over Louis and Sarkota standing behind Lumian.

"Aren't they Brignais's men? Why would you allow them to tail you?

"If it were me, I'd put them to work as bouncers."

Louis and Sarkota exchanged anxious glances when Simon hit the nail on the head.

Lumian wanted to applaud, grateful that Simon had provided him with an opportunity to win their trust.

However, he couldn't entirely trust Louis and Sarkota. He had no desire to become a mobster, but he didn't want to be shot in the back, riddled with bullets someday.

Lumian smirked once again.

"What do you mean Brignais's men? I used to work under Brignais!"

"We're all members of the Savoie Mob, loyal to the Boss. As long as I remain faithful, there's no need to worry about them turning against me!"

Louis and Sarkota nodded repeatedly, impressed by Ciel's broad-mindedness and demeanor.

That's right. Baron Brignais changed our status in the Savoie Mob and gave us a lot of trust, but we're still members of the Savoie Mob. Betraying the Boss is out of the question. And it was the Boss who commanded us to follow Ciel and obey his orders!

Simon choked on Lumian's words. After a few seconds, he finally said, "You may be loyal to the Boss, but others might not be. Brignais is ambitious."

You find Brignais unloyal to the Boss? Hidden Blade… Uh… 'Red Boots' Franca mentioned that Brignais hasn't been obedient lately… Lumian suddenly felt pity for Gardner Martin, the boss of the Savoie Mob.

His most capable subordinates lacked loyalty, and his favorite mistress had ulterior motives. The newcomer he had recently promoted turned out to be a spy from another organization…

Realizing he couldn't shake off Louis and Sarkota, two thugs who often accompanied Baron Brignais and had knowledge of various matters, Simon steered the conversation back on track.

"I came here to discuss the dancers' basic salary."

"F*cking dammit, why the bloody hell do we have to give those sluts money every day, even when they don't have a single customer?

"Franca is overbearing. Just because she's the Boss's mistress, she convinced him to agree to such an unreasonable demand!

"We're mobsters, not a charity. By Steam, when I handed money to those women, I felt like a bloody priest!

"That's fine by me. I only need to give them a few licks each day. But it's 1 verl d'or a day for Salle de Bal Brise. The textile workers in Quartier du Jardin Botanique earn only 1.5 verl d'or a day, and they work from morning till night!"

No wonder Franca's beautiful dancers refused to work on Rue du Rossignol. The prices there are low, and the base salary is meager… Why are you cursing like Franca and Jenna? Can vulgarities be contagious? Aurore seemed to curse in the same manner during her occasional bouts of madness… Lumian deliberately ignored Louis's suggestion and asked with a smile, "What's your plan?"

Simon's fury remained etched on his face.

"You, me, and Black, we'll go to the Boss together. We must make him change his mind and rein in Franca!

"Which of the other mobs pays their dancers a base salary?"

Is he trying to take advantage of my recent takeover of Salle de Bal Brise? Is he inciting me to rebel against the Boss? Heh heh, as Aurore once said, the early worm gets eaten by birds, and ravens who stick their necks out get shot… Lumian raised his hands, cracking his knuckles with a sly smile.

"It's pointless. Franca is the Boss's mistress. The Boss will undoubtedly heed her. If you want him to change his mind, there's only one way—become the boss yourself!"

Is this something you should say in front of so many people? Louis, Sarkota, and the others behind Lumian were so terrified that they almost covered their leader's mouth.

"Giant" Simon also appeared taken aback.

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

Most of his thugs trembled with fear.

“What I mean is…” Lumian suddenly seized the table’s edge and flung it at “Giant” Simon!

Clang!

The table crashed to the ground, and the cups upon it shattered into shards.

“Giant” Simon had already retreated two steps, his expression darkening. His subordinates instinctively reached for their revolvers. He looked at Lumian and demanded,

“What do you want?”

Lumian stood behind the upturned wooden table, seething with anger.

“You wretched dogsh*t, does the Boss mean anything to you? How dare you plot a mutiny in secret, attempting to force him to change his orders!

“Do you truly aspire to be the boss?

“The Boss’s commands must be carried out, whether they’re good or bad. If there’s an issue, you can address it with the Boss privately, but you cannot conspire with others to coerce him!”

The question exposed “Giant” Simon’s true intentions, leaving him unable to explode in anger or continue inciting Ciel.

He spat out his words. “Damn it, is there something wrong with your brain? When did I say I wanted to force the Boss? I merely suggested that everyone should approach the Boss and explain that providing a dancer with a base salary is unreasonable. It places a heavy burden on us.”

With that, “Giant” Simon waved his hand, wearing an expression that conveyed difficulty in communicating with Ciel. He turned and departed, his subordinates trailing after him, descending the staircase.

Observing their departure, Lumian inwardly chuckled.

Thank you so much. Tomorrow, no, tonight, the Boss will come to know how loyal I am!

Lumian had stumbled upon an opportunity to earn Gardner Martin’s trust, and he seized it without hesitation.

Putting on a show, he simulated an angry exhale, restraining his emotions. Pointing at the mess on the floor, he commanded Louis and the others, “Clean this

up.”

Just as Lumian finished speaking, a figure emerged from the shadows near the staircase.

It was Jenna, having finished her performance in the dance hall.

Jenna wasn’t wearing a revealing outfit today. Her rose-colored dress, supported by a petticoat, made her resemble an upside-down flower. Her brownish-yellow hair was tied in a simple bun at the back, with some loose strands cascading gently. The dark circles around her blue eyes were less pronounced, lending her a touch of elegance. A mole adorned the middle of her left cheek.

This symbolized elegance.

Observing Jenna, Lumian couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Do the folks in the market district appreciate this style?”

He was referring to Jenna’s less provocative attire.

Jenna smiled smugly.

“It works surprisingly well from time to time. Franca mentioned that sometimes, the more unattainable something appears to men, the more they desire it. F*ck, I can’t quite fathom that mentality.”

“What’s the matter?” Lumian glanced at the waiters tidying up and found another table to sit at.

Jenna took a seat opposite him and smiled.

“I’m here to discuss the singing fee for next week. Previously, it was 10 songs per night, 4 verl d’or, and a third of the money thrown onto the stage.

“Lately, it seems I’ve become more popular than in the past few months!”

Lumian pondered for a moment before responding.

“Has the Poison Spur Mob grown suspicious of you, making it difficult for you to perform at their dance halls?”

“F*ck, that infuriates me! Couldn’t you have disguised yourself better? You were identified so easily, and it ended up implicating me!” Jenna replied indignantly.

A mischievous grin played at the corners of Lumian’s mouth.

“Starting from today, you will still perform 10 songs per night, but the fee will be increased to 10 verl d’or. You can keep two-thirds of the money thrown onto the stage.”

Louis, who stood behind Lumian, felt a pang of sorrow.

Although Little Minx didn't sing here every night, she frequented the place several times a week. This change would result in Salle de Bal Brise earning 2,000 verl d'or less annually!

However, it seemed that Little Minx had played a significant role in the assassination of "Hammer" Ait, the mob leader. As a consequence, she had lost the opportunity to perform in Poison Spur Mob's territory, amounting to a loss of over 1,000 verl d'or per year.

Jenna appeared quite content.

Receiving 10 verl d'or for 10 songs and keeping two-thirds of the money thrown on stage was the most generous treatment in the underground singer industry.

She smiled and said, "I can only come for three days next week, from Friday to Sunday night."

"Seeking opportunities at dance halls in other districts?" Lumian inquired casually.

Jenna shook her head.

"No, I don't have that much time to bloody sing. I have other things to attend to."

"Isn't being an underground singer your profession?" Lumian inquired curiously.

"This is just a part-time gig!" Jenna emphasized with a smirk. "My main job is being the shared mistress of 'Lion' Ciel and 'Red Boots' Franca!"

Louis's legs nearly buckled at the jest.

In his mind, Franca was a possessive woman. She had taught a lesson to any man who dared to snatch Little Minx away from her.

If the boss truly became involved with Little Minx, he would undoubtedly face Red Boots' fury!

This fellow has other identities? Lumian's thoughts raced as he asked thoughtfully, "Is Jenna your real name or an alias?"

Part-time underground singers often adopted an alias to avoid impacting their other occupations.

Jenna's lips curled up, and she blinked before replying, "What do you think, Monsieur Ciel?"

She deliberately emphasized the name Ciel, implying that he, too, used an alias.

With that, Jenna rose from her seat, leaned across the wooden table, and whispered into Lumian's ear, "After hearing your conversation with 'Giant' Simon, I have a sincere suggestion. The less loyal someone is, the more they boast about their loyalty. Your performance went a bit overboard, hehe."

Jenna straightened up, wearing an air of pride, and confidently walked toward the staircase.

Finally, it was her turn to "educate" Ciel!

Is that so? Lumian pondered as he watched Jenna's departing figure.

"Aren't you wearing perfume today?"

Jenna turned around, her expression brimming with delight as she inquired, "So you didn't notice me ascending the stairs?"

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Chapter 182 - 182 Truth Serum

182 Truth Serum

“What do you think, Madame Jenna?” Lumian grinned, throwing Jenna’s own words back at her.

“Damn it!” Jenna exclaimed, raising her hand in frustration before turning around with a scowl and storming back downstairs.

Lumian pondered for a few moments, tapping the table in front of him. He turned to Louis and Sarkota and said, “Bring me a glass of fennel absinthe.”

Being the “protector” of Salle de Bal Brise had its perks, and his meals here were on the house.

As he remembered that he had to hand over most of the dance hall’s profits to the Boss and bribe the police, Lumian felt less inclined to be frugal.

No matter how difficult things became, he couldn’t let himself suffer. He had to do his utmost to make the Boss suffer instead!

Lumian drank two glasses of the bitter, mind-altering light-green liquid and remained at Salle de Bal Brise until nearly midnight.

Standing up, he turned to Louis and Sarkota and declared, “I’m going to bed. Wait until the dance hall closes before you head home.

“If anyone causes trouble, throw them out. If you can’t handle them alone, gather everyone and be bold enough to take action. Don’t worry, I’ll take responsibility if anything goes wrong.”

What he left unsaid was: If I can’t handle the responsibility, I’ll leave it for the Boss to worry about.

Salle de Bal Brise stayed open until 2 a.m. every day, usually opening between 10:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

“Yes, Boss,” Sarkota and Louis replied in unison.

Upon returning to his bedroom, Lumian lingered for another fifteen minutes before grabbing the brown suitcase containing Aurore’s grimoires. He squeezed out of the window and smoothly landed on the ground from the second floor.

He walked through the shadows, turning from Avenue du Marché into Rue des Blouses Blanches, and entered the safe house he had rented previously.

After hiding the grimoires and releasing some sulfur to repel the bugs, Lumian left the room and turned into an alley behind Rue des Blouses Blanches. He planned to take a detour to Auberge du Coq Doré, where he would spend the night.

After walking a dozen steps, he noticed a pile of trash beside a barricade.

Scavengers and cleaners wouldn't come until the next morning to clean it up. At that moment, it had become a haven for rats, cockroaches, flies, and stray dogs.

Seeing the rats and stray dogs, Lumian suddenly remembered something.

Among the three metal canisters he had acquired from the perverted Hedsey, one remained unidentified.

I might as well give it a try… Lumian nodded to himself imperceptibly.

Relying on his exceptional skills, lightning-fast reflexes, nimble movements, and keen observation, he swiftly stepped on a rat with grayish-black fur. He crouched down, retrieved the slightly heavy metal canister, and poured some odorless, colorless liquid into the "prey's" mouth.

The rat let out a quick squeak, but aside from that, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Considering the pervert's methods, I thought it might be an aphrodisiac, but it doesn't seem like it… That makes sense. That pervert possesses Beyonder powers that stimulate desire. He wouldn't need an additional canister with the same effect… Lumian lifted his right foot, watching as the rat scurried back to its companions. It joined the swarm while emitting continuous squeaks, but it didn't do anything else.

Suddenly, a voice as clear as crystal rang out from behind him.

"What are you up to?"

Lumian whirled around and beheld "Red Boots" Franca emerging from the shadows at the far end of the alley.

She still sported her trademark red boots, off-white breeches, and a black-and-white checkered blouse. Her flaxen hair was neatly tied up.

Why are you here? Lumian was about to inquire, but he promptly recalled that Franca resided at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

He could only respond honestly, "Conducting an experiment."

"What kind of experiment?" Franca approached with curiosity.

Her eyes, resembling sparkling lakes, surveyed the rats before she let out a chuckle.

“Has your sister taught you to experiment on rats?”

“Are you referring to laboratory rats?” Lumian found it easy to converse with Franca. Many words required no further explanation.

He then said, “Didn’t Jenna inform you that after I disposed of the pervert, I obtained three metal canisters? One contained gas that could render people unconscious. I depleted it when I eliminated ‘Hammer’ Ait. The second canister contained an accompanying gaseous stimulant, and there’s still a fair amount left.

“The third canister holds a liquid. I’m unsure of its properties. Hence, I experimented on these rats.”

Understanding dawned on Franca’s face.

“So, it’s a leftover from that pervert.”

She then asked with anticipation, “Could it be an aphrodisiac?”

Why do you share my thoughts, Madame? Lumian gestured towards the squeaking rat, finding amusement in the situation.

“It doesn’t seem so. You appear somewhat disappointed?”

Franca didn’t conceal her feelings and let out a sigh.

“Indeed. If it were truly an aphrodisiac, how intriguing it would be.”

“If it were indeed an aphrodisiac, what would you want to use it for?” Lumian suddenly harbored suspicions that Franca intended to do something to Jenna.

Franca glanced at him.

“Damn it, are you accusing me in your mind? Do you think I have no moral boundaries?

“I hope it’s an aphrodisiac. My main curiosity lies in experiencing its effects and effectiveness. I would consume some myself and have Gardner try it as well. If his mistresses desire, they can partake too. Do you understand the pleasures of flirtation and amusement?”

“…” Lumian was momentarily at a loss for words. After a few seconds, he responded, “You Trierians certainly excel at games.”

“I’m not a Trierian,” Franca retorted, “but I concur with your statement.”

She turned her gaze towards the metal canister in Lumian’s grasp.

“Shall I assist you in discovering its properties?”

“Aren’t you concerned about the dangers?” Lumian was somewhat taken aback.

It remained uncertain whether this vial of liquid was a slow-acting poison or a vessel for curses!

Franca chuckled and replied, “You truly need to supplement your knowledge of mysticism.

“I intend to employ divination. Witches possess considerable divinatory abilities.”

Aurore’s grimoires made no mention of it. They solely documented the Witch’s Potion, which causes gender transformation. It speculates that every Witch excels in spells… Yes, those proficient in spells shouldn’t be lacking in divination… Lumian handed the liquid-filled canister to Franca.

Franca walked to the edge of the alley and halted behind a five-story building.

She extended her right hand and traced it back and forth on the dim glass window.

Simultaneously, she softly recited something in Hermes. Even with Lumian’s acute hearing, he could only catch a few words.

Spirituality… Inquiry… Answer…

A few seconds later, the glass window darkened and deepened, as though it led to an enigmatic, unknown world.

Franca stepped back, raised the metal canister, and spoke in Intis, “What is the purpose of the liquid inside?”

From the depths of the glass window, an aged voice responded, “Induces an urge to confess.”

Franca nodded, expressed gratitude, and concluded the divination.

As the glass window returned to its original state, she turned to Lumian and stated, “It appears to be a concoction akin to a truth serum.”

“Truth serum?” Lumian inquired.

Aurore had never mentioned such a term.

Franca casually explained, “It’s a serum that compels people to speak the truth.

“Once their desire to spill their secrets is triggered, along with the interrogator’s questioning, although there may be a fair amount of nonsense, it becomes exceedingly challenging to lie. What they utter should stem from their innermost desires.”

Confiding their desires… Similar to the pervert's other abilities, involving diverse human yearnings… As expected of a boon from the Mother Tree of Desire… This could prove quite useful for a Beyonder like me, who lacks proficiency in spirit communication and divination… Lumian retrieved the metal canister from Franca.

Franca glanced around and queried with a smile, "Why did you choose Rue des Blouses Blanches for the experiment? Shouldn't your activities be centered around Avenue du Marché and Rue Anarchie?"

Lumian withheld nothing.

"I rented a safe house here to safeguard my sister's grimoires. I fear they may be damaged if I am targeted."

"Very cautious," Franca nodded approvingly. "Your sister is fortunate to have a brother like you. I used to have a brother too. He was conceited, enjoyed flaunting his skills, and lacked practicality. I yearned to teach him a lesson every day…"

She trailed off midway, her gaze falling upon her red boots.

Used to have. Does that imply he is no longer present? Lumian keenly sensed Franca's unspoken meaning and promptly understood the reason behind her sudden despondency.

After a few seconds, Franca's smile returned.

"Your sister must trust you too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have revealed our organization to you. Although we never explicitly mentioned keeping the research society a secret from our families, hardly anyone ever discloses it. After all…"

Franca fell silent once more, her smile taking on a bitter tinge.

After all, what? Lumian was perplexed, but he refrained from asking. Instead, he simply elaborated on Aurore's rationale.

"We were caught in a calamity back then, unsure of who would survive and who would perish. That's why my sister divulged some secrets to me, hoping they would prove useful in the future."

"Understood." Franca nodded, regaining her composure. She smiled and remarked, "I thought you came to Rue des Blouses Blanches in search of me, eager to learn about mysticism."

"It's too late now." Lumian was already feeling weary.

Franca clicked her tongue and chuckled.

"I won't do anything to you. It's too… too mad and shameful to engage in such activities with someone who knows my true gender."

Is that so? I was afraid that once you got accustomed to it, the shame would only heighten your excitement… Lumian suspected that Franca, who could be swayed by the notion of "Life is short, why not give it a try," would engage in more unforeseen endeavors.

After bidding farewell to the Demoness, he returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Nothing eventful occurred in Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman until Thursday.

At 8 p.m., Lumian arrived at 19 Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard and met Mr. K in the basement.

Mr. K gestured towards the three assistants holding silver trays behind him and stated, "There are a total of three mystical items, each priced between 15,000 verl d'or and 20,000. Make your selection."

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Chapter 183 - 183 Three Items

183 Three Items

Upon entering the basement, Lumian's eyes immediately fell upon three silver plates holding the items.

There was an unassuming white glove, a pair of gold-rimmed glasses with a tea-colored tint, and a shiny golden button.

Observing Lumian's interest in the mystical objects, Mr. K, seated in a red armchair, introduced them in a low, raspy voice, "That glove is Circus. It grants you some weak but peculiar mystical abilities. It can conjure a gust of wind, create fog, and use bursts of light to mess with your target's vision. By touching them, you can freeze your enemies. You can also open most doors without a key. It can even guide you through solid walls.

"These techniques suit your need for mysticism, but remember, carrying it will make you lose your way more often. And sometimes, getting lost brings misfortune.

"Price is 18,000 verl d'or."

!!

Sounds like the Sequence 8 Trickmaster of the Apprentice pathway mentioned in Aurore's grimoires… Although the powers aren't formidable, if used as support alongside traps or my close combat skills and revolver shots, they can yield miraculous results. Lumian found solace in the positive effects of the Circus glove, compensating for his lack of mysticism and helplessness in certain situations.

However, the negative effects were dire. For Hunters who relied on tracking and pathfinding, losing their way frequently meant losing their strengths entirely. Misfortune could strike at any moment, even without wearing the glove. Merely having it in his pocket would affect Lumian.

Mr. K shifted his attention to the brown, gold-rimmed glasses and addressed Lumian, "Do you remember the painting from the gathering?"

Painting? Lumian's mind immediately conjured the image of the dizzying oil painting.

The painting, reputedly created by a Beyonder before his demise, boasted vibrant colors, a peculiar pattern, and a hallucinatory scene. It seemed as if the artist had descended into madness before his death.

“I do.” Lumian nodded.

Mr. K continued, “After the painting’s owner passed away, his Beyonder attributes together with a strange power fused into his glasses, creating a unique mystical item.

“It allows the wearer to perceive things invisible to the naked eye. Occasionally, one can glimpse the truth of this world to some extent…”

Aurore’s cautionary words echoed in Lumian’s mind: “Don’t see what you shouldn’t see, don’t listen to what you shouldn’t hear.”

Internally, Lumian couldn’t help but criticize, Isn’t this pair of glasses doing the exact opposite? It’s like a weapon of self-destruction! These items seem to have nothing to do with my two needs…

Mr. K glanced at Lumian, his voice still low and raspy in the confined basement. “By perceiving the world from a different perspective and witnessing the once-invisible, the wearer will be seized by an uncontrollable urge to paint. Each painting produced will possess supernatural effects. For instance, a painting of an ocean will make onlookers feel as if they’re drowning.”

“In a similar vein, if you apply various cosmetics to your face instead of painting on canvas, you can achieve an excellent disguise. Anyone scrutinizing your face will be convinced that it’s your true appearance, albeit temporarily.”

“Remember, once you’ve painted a ‘new’ face, avoid looking in the mirror. Otherwise, you’ll believe it to be your real self. Slowly but surely, your body and mind will transform until you become an entirely different person.”

“Much like this, you can’t sustain that newfound countenance indefinitely. After a span of three hours or more, your sense of self will gradually succumb to its influence until you wholeheartedly believe that you are one and the same.”

Upon analyzing the possible Beyonder domain of the mystical item, Lumian couldn’t help but speculate, It sounds akin to the hypnosis and suggestions of the Psychiatrist pathway, but it differs greatly in other aspects… Considering the demise of the painter, could it be a power or aura left behind by an evil god?

Mr. K fixed his gaze on the brown glasses.

“You can probably surmise its negative effects. Seeing what should remain unseen and perceiving the truth of the world without adequate protection exposes you to unknown dangers. Perhaps, one day, you may meet a peculiar death like the painter, leaving behind an enigmatic painting.

“The price is 15,000 verl d’or.”

Corresponding to a Sequence 9 Lawyer? The crucial aspect lies in the peculiar power associated with it. Yes, it doesn’t fully reflect a Lawyer’s abilities. Aurore’s

grimoires describe Lawyers as masters of eloquence and reasoning, adept at uncovering loopholes in rules and exploiting their opponents' weaknesses. They create an advantageous atmosphere to achieve ultimate victory. They can influence judgment, thoughts, and conclusions through their words, actions, and established processes. Additionally, they excel at utilizing the power of order… Lumian mentally reviewed the relevant mystical knowledge.

However, he remained uncertain about the Lawyer trait, particularly how to harness the power of order. Aurore lacked knowledge in that regard as well.

In essence, the brown gold-rimmed glasses fulfilled Lumian's need for better disguises. They also provided mystical means that required preparation but were less troublesome than the Alms Monk's elaborate rituals.

The only issue was its perilous nature!

Lumian contemplated, but didn't reach a final decision. He awaited Mr. K's introduction of the golden button.

Before long, Mr. K's raspy voice resounded again.

"It's called Flare. It originated from a deceased Light Suppliant.

"It grants additional buffs such as courage and strength through singing. It enables you to sense the presence of undead creatures and evil entities. You can also employ spells and rituals from the Sun domain, making it highly effective against undead souls and similar targets.

"After wearing it, you'll feel compelled to sing. Darkness and cold become unbearable, and you'll yearn for sunlight and warmth. If you haven't removed it after half an hour, you'll become a devoted follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, earnestly praising the Sun.

"The price is 20,000 verl d'or."

If it can resolve my issue of resisting the undead, the negative effects are bearable… The problem lies in the limited viable targets… Lumian pondered deeply, torn between which item to choose.

His rationale suggested opting for Flare or Circus, yet he couldn't make a decisive choice.

The brown gold-rimmed glasses catered to both of his needs and were his preferred option.

By wearing them solely before disguising himself and creating paintings with supernatural effects in a safe environment, he could effectively evade most of the negative consequences. Thus, he would avoid witnessing things he shouldn't and the so-called truth of the world.

In essence, it wasn't an item that needed constant donning. Lumian could choose the opportune moment to utilize it.

This way, he could proactively construct a spiritual barrier, screening out anomalies, similar to when he performed the Summoning Dance.

Considering his seal, the "coincidences" of Inevitability, and the occasional Summoning Dance, Lumian didn't believe an additional trait would worsen matters.

"I want those glasses."

Mr. K appeared taken aback by Lumian's choice. After a few seconds, he queried, "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain." Lumian produced a small cloth bag brimming with banknotes and meticulously counted out 15,000 verl d'or.

Mr. K refrained from further persuasion, emitting a raspy chuckle.

"You're even crazier than I presumed."

There was a hint of admiration in his tone.

Instructing the attendant to accept the 15,000 verl d'or and hand over the brown glasses to Lumian, Mr. K nodded and remarked, "You can give them a test run here. It's safe enough."

Lumian caressed the frame and discovered that the seemingly metallic material had an odd rubbery texture.

I'll dub you the Mystery Prying Glasses… Lumian pondered, recalling his sister's Beyonder pathway.

In the ensuing moment, he placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

Almost instantly, he beheld a multitude of scenes from various angles.

The mottled ceiling, bloodstains in the corners, Mr. K's back that should have been out of sight, and the attendants stationed in the corridor…

Lumian also caught sight of a blot of darkness, a silhouette, a gaze emanating from an unknown source, and a visage concealed within the shadows.

Beneath the hood lay black, feathery hair, delicate features, sunken eyes, dark orbs, and ageless skin, only visible from below.

Is that Mr. K's face? Lumian experienced a sudden revelation.

Images from different perspectives flooded his mind, leaving him feeling lightheaded. His state of mind grew increasingly abnormal, and an insatiable urge to capture everything overcame him.

Hastily, Lumian removed the Mystery Prying Glasses, and his vision reverted to normal. Yet, the compulsion to draw lingered within him.

Exhaling deeply, he declared, “It’s tolerable.”

Mr. K offered a brief warning, “Try to employ it in familiar and secure situations.”

After bidding farewell to Mr. K and departing the Psychic’s headquarters, Lumian boarded a carriage back to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

En route, as he passed through Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, a thought struck him.

I must gather some canvases, brushes, and paints…

Even though my skills are limited to sketching and not particularly exceptional, the quality of the painting shouldn’t influence the attached supernatural effects. Perhaps, the more distorted and grotesque it appears, the better the outcome…

Fifteen minutes later, Lumian alighted from the carriage ahead of schedule and located a shop specializing in oil painting supplies.

Upon hearing the price, he couldn’t help but inquire, “What? 160 verl d’or? A single canvas costs 160 verl d’or?”

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Chapter 184 - 184 Painting

184 Painting

When Lumian stepped back into the Auberge du Coq Doré, his mind was still filled with the exorbitant cost of painting supplies.

Among his colleagues at the Salle de Bal Brise, Charlie's monthly salary as a waiter was considered decent. However, it would take him two months of forgoing food and drink just to afford a single roll of canvas!

Lumian couldn't help but view painters as a destitute lot. How could they ever afford canvases, brushes, paints, wooden frames, human models, and all the other expenses that came with their craft?

Perhaps they relied on financial support from their families just to get by. Shaking off these thoughts, Lumian closed the door behind him and carefully placed the stack of items on the wooden table.

Eventually, he resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't afford proper canvases. Instead, he settled for the cheapest brushes, paints, paper, and other necessities. The truth was, Lumian didn't aspire to be a painter or have his work displayed in an exhibition. He simply needed a medium to imbue the supernatural power, obtained from the Mystery Prying Glasses. The quality of the paint, the possibility of cracking, the fading over time, or even his painting skills were all inconsequential matters.

And so, Lumian spent a total of 30 verl d'or, acquiring his modest supplies.

Mixing a palette of vibrant colors and unfurling a flexible sheet of white paper, Lumian prepared himself for the ritual ahead. With the sanctified silver dagger in hand, he crafted a wall of spirituality within Room 207.

His intention was to explore what he could draw and observe the effects it would yield.

Based on the reaction of Madam Magician's messenger at Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian surmised that there was nothing particularly abnormal about this place. The only notable issue seemed to be the abundance of bedbugs. Susanna Mattise's predicament most likely had its origins in Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons or perhaps even an underground cavern.

Taking a slow breath, Lumian retrieved the brown glasses with golden rims and carefully placed them upon the bridge of his nose.

In an instant, the world around him seemed to spin, as if he had plummeted from the sky into the depths of the earth.

During this disorienting journey, Lumian beheld the inverted motel with its occupants moving about in a similar fashion, an underground bar, roots of trees and soil extending beneath the surface, rats lurking in the corners, and vermin scurrying about.

Deeper and deeper he fell, enduring the nauseating sensation of weightlessness.

And then, he caught sight of an immense network of brownish-green roots stretching in all directions, reaching into the distance and vanishing into the void.

"Ugh…" Lumian nearly expelled the contents of his stomach. The remnants of his unfinished dinner rose to his throat, threatening to escape.

Swiftly, he removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and fought the urge to vomit. Fueled by an insatiable desire to draw, Lumian picked up a paintbrush, dipped it into the paint, and began sketching upon the blank canvas.

Unbeknownst to him, his spirituality infused the brush with an increasing vigor.

After a few minutes, Lumian halted his strokes and gazed upon his creation.

What in the world have I drawn? The question echoed in his mind.

Upon careful observation, he managed to discern the subject of his artwork: a triangular house with a grayish-blue hue, its roof adorned with green trees, and rain resembling mud.

Lumian stared at the painting for a moment and suddenly felt an itching sensation on the back of his hand. Unable to resist, he scratched it, only to witness his skin turning red and swollen, accompanied by an all-over itchiness.

Could this be the Beyonder influence of the painting? Lumian's heart stirred as he looked away, attempting to soothe the irritation through the friction of his clothes. But his efforts were in vain, and he couldn't help but scratch a few more times.

As he averted his gaze from the child-like graffiti of an "oil painting," the itching gradually subsided and eventually vanished.

The urge to paint had vanished as well.

He turned around and contemplated the details.

I have to stare at the painting for at least three seconds before my body itches…

It's challenging to use it in battle. I can't just stick it on my face, can I?

If I use it as a trap, it might have some utility…

I wonder if there are any paintings that can be used without drawing the target's attention?

After careful consideration, Lumian resolved to make another attempt.

He donned the Mystery Prying Glasses once more, and the experience was nearly identical.

However, this time he also glimpsed deep darkness and shadowy figures moving within it.

Amidst the waves of nausea, Lumian removed his brown gold-rimmed glasses, retrieved a fresh sheet of paper, and took up a paintbrush.

This time, he didn't surrender to impulsive strokes but instead focused on visualizing what he desired and endeavored to bring the drawing closer to the image in his mind.

With this approach, Lumian crafted a golden-red sun, surrounded by a vibrant circle of colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

As he finished, Room 207 suddenly warmed, and the chill in the air dissipated.

It seems to have a simple exorcism effect… Lumian wasn't entirely certain.

He sat on the edge of the bed, carefully observing the changes.

Over time, the warmth, which initially evoked restlessness and unease, began to fade.

Lumian attempted to fold the painting, keeping its back facing outward. The warmth promptly vanished, and the loss of spiritual essence within the painting slowed to a barely noticeable pace.

I should be able to preserve it for about two months… When unfurled, it can only be used for three days at most… Yes, this is akin to an alternative method of creating Beyonder weapons. Lumian estimated, recalling his previous experiences.

Drawing two paintings in quick succession had placed a considerable burden on his spirituality.

After taking a short break, Lumian proceeded with his third experiment.

This time, he switched to using makeup-related painting tools.

Putting on the Mystery Prying Glasses once again, he braced himself for the sensation of spiraling into the depths. In the midst of it, Lumian caught sight of several indistinct figures lurking in the shadows. Removing the mystical item, he began smearing various substances on his face, carefully tracing lines with the aid of the glass window, which was illuminated by the light of the carbide lamp.

Similar to his previous attempt, Lumian made an effort to maintain control over his makeup, but occasionally, his instincts took over.

Reflecting on the "mirror," he saw his appearance becoming worn and haggard. His eyebrows appeared disheveled, his cheekbones slightly more pronounced, and his lips a touch fuller.

It felt as if he were looking at a stranger. Hastily averting his gaze, he drew the curtain to conceal the result of his "painting."

Having packed away the Itchiness and Sun paintings along with the various tools, Lumian decided it was time to venture out and verify the effects.

As he made his way to Salle de Bal Brise, he noticed Jenna engaging in flamboyant gestures while singing at the top of her lungs, and Charlie, who had just delivered some drinks to the outskirts of the dance floor.

The thugs paid no attention to Lumian, and none of them addressed him as their boss. Feeling a sense of relief, Lumian walked over to Charlie's side, gave his shoulder a friendly pat, and smiled. "Good evening!"

Charlie, clad in a white shirt and black vest, turned around, returning the smile as he asked,

"Good evening, Monsieur. Would you like something to drink?"

Deliberately, Lumian inquired, "Don't you recognize me?"

Caught off guard, Charlie's eyes widened, and for a few seconds, he gazed at the distant gas wall lamp.

Suddenly, a smile spread across his face, and he exclaimed in astonishment, "It's you! Praise the Sun. How long has it been since we last met? Just wait a moment. I'll come to you as soon as I'm not so busy!"

Charlie pointed towards the bar counter and bid Lumian farewell.

"This kid's acting skills are quite impressive," Lumian chuckled with satisfaction. "He didn't even recognize his own boss, me!"

Shifting his gaze, Lumian approached Jenna's stage, patiently waiting for her to finish singing a song filled with vulgar lyrics.

As soon as Jenna finished collecting the copper and silver coins from the stage and descended, Lumian eagerly greeted her and exclaimed, "You sang magnificently! Can I treat you to a drink?"

Jenna immediately put on a cautious expression.

Ever since the incident with that perverted Hedsey, she couldn't afford to be careless around any audience member who approached her. She worried about encountering another unpleasant situation.

For a few seconds, she examined Lumian's face and forced a smile to conceal her wariness.

"I must preserve my voice for my next song! Help me out by having another drink!"

With a wink, Jenna approached the two mobsters guarding the stage, seeking their assistance.

The mobsters didn't dare offend Showy Diva, who was rumored to be their boss and Red Boots' lover. Stepping forward, they positioned themselves between Lumian and Jenna.

Seizing the opportunity, Jenna made her way to the lounge near the bar counter.

Before leaving, she glanced at Lumian's hair color and scrutinized his face intently for a moment. She muttered to herself, "Bloody hell, is this some sort of fashion trend now?"

Lumian happily averted his gaze and turned toward the staircase leading to the café. The two vigilant mobsters guarding the area stopped him.

Very dutiful… Lumian smiled and replied, "Just going for a cup of coffee!"

After observing Lumian closely for a few seconds, the two mobsters stepped aside.

Entering the café and noticing that Louis and Sarkota had nothing to do, Lumian made his way to the washroom.

He didn't dare look at himself in the mirror. Instead, he splashed tap water on his face and rubbed it a few times, gradually removing his makeup.

When he was done, he looked at the mirror and saw his pale and weary reflection staring back at him.

It drains my spirituality quite a bit… I even painted two artworks earlier, Lumian thought to himself, regaining his composure before leaving the washroom.

Louis glanced around and stood up in surprise.

"Boss! When did you return?"

"Just now," Lumian replied, pointing towards the corridor. "I'm going to get some rest."

“Understood, Boss,” Louis and Sarkota responded obediently, refraining from questioning further.

Lumian entered his room, compelled himself to freshen up, and settled down on the bed, drifting into sleep.

In his dream, he experienced the unbearable sensation of freefalling from midair towards the ground. As he plummeted, the earth beneath him unexpectedly cracked open, revealing a sea of raging flames. Lumian felt a searing and piercing pain in his mind. He snapped his eyes open, sitting up and gasping for breath.

In that moment, the room was enveloped in darkness and silence. Only a faint glow of crimson moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a dim light upon the desk beside the window.

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Chapter 185 - 185 Missing Goods

185 Missing Goods

Why did I have such a dream? It felt eerily real… Lumian collected himself and assessed his condition, but found nothing amiss.

Yet, in his dream, he felt as though he was once again wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses, and they revealed even more.

After pondering for a while, Lumian suspected that the negative effects of wearing the Mystery Prying Glasses three times in a row still lingered. They seemed to have seeped into his subconscious, manifesting in his dream within the confines of Salle de Bal Brise, an ancient burial ground.

It appears that something is truly amiss beneath the surface here… Lumian sighed inwardly. He rose from his bed, donned his coat, and resolved to spend the night elsewhere to test his hypothesis.

Under the cover of darkness, with Salle de Bal Brise devoid of any illumination, Lumian followed the shadows along the roadside and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré, its main entrance locked.

For Lumian, this posed no obstacle. He didn't try rousing the irritable Madame Fels by knocking on the door. Instead, he circled around to the side, traced the pipe, and climbed onto the balcony on the second floor.

In Room 207, Lumian slept until six in the morning. He experienced only two sporadic, ordinary dreams.

So, it was indeed the ancient bones buried deep beneath Salle de Bal Brise that triggered the residual powers of the Mystery Prying Glasses within me… Lumian sat up, a mixture of delight and disappointment washing over him.

His original plan was to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to create one or two supernatural paintings each day, accumulating them for future needs. However, it seemed that frequent use of the glasses was ill-advised. He would have to wait until the lingering negative effects dissipated before attempting further experiments. Otherwise, he risked something dreadful and bizarre happening over time, possibly leading to a strange demise akin to the Lawyer who had left the glasses behind, leaving behind only an eerie oil painting with enduring abnormal effects.

Tonight, I shall sleep within Salle de Bal Brise and ascertain whether the negative effects have dissipated… In the future, I must refrain from wearing the glasses

more than twice in a brief span of time… These are the details Mr. K neglected to mention. Yes, I must experience them firsthand. Only through firsthand experience can I truly comprehend… Lumian rose energetically and made his way to the washroom to freshen up.

It being still early, many of the tenants were still abed, and the morning remained tranquil, devoid of the usual clamor over access to the washroom.

From time to time, Madame Fels would ascend the stairs to inspect the water meters on each floor, ensuring no one wasted the precious resource.

A contract had been inked between Auberge du Coq Doré and the Imperial Water Supply Company, stipulating a daily allowance of no less than 250 liters and no more than 500 liters of water. The cost amounted to 100 verl d'or per year.

Leisurely, Lumian strolled to the café on Rue des Blouses Blanches. He indulged in delectable treats like sablé cookies and brioche, a softer variation of croissants. Afterwards, he sought out a place for exercise.

Upon returning to Auberge du Coq Doré, he spotted Charlie, sporting a linen shirt and black trousers, seated on the steps outside the entrance, relishing a mouthful of meatloaf accompanied by an Apple Whiskey Sour.

"So early?" Lumian inquired, a smile playing on his lips.

Salle de Bal Brise closed its doors at 2 a.m., and the morning had yet to reach 8:30 a.m.

Uncertain whether to hastily rise and greet his employer or engage in the usual casual conversation, Charlie hesitated for a moment before standing up, a sheepish smile on his face.

"I think I'll catch a bit more sleep before heading back to the dance hall. I don't think I can keep doing this. I reckon there ought to be some time when we don't have to sleep or work. Otherwise, it feels, feels…"

Salle de Bal Brise opened at 10:30 a.m.

"Feels like we're mere machines built for work, devoid of a life to call our own?" Lumian finished Charlie's sentence, lending him a helping hand.

"Exactly! That's spot on!" Charlie agreed. "You're quite the refined individual, you know? Sometimes, you don't seem like a mobster at all. I mean, not like the leader of the Savoie Mob. You come across as more… civilized!"

Had everything gone according to plan, I would have been studying at a university in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. I would be spending time chatting with my classmates and exploring the depths of Underground Trier… Lumian's heart sank as he focused his attention on Charlie.

This was the method he used to observe whether Susanna Mattise's issue still lingered and when it would rear its head.

"W-What are you staring at?" Charlie stammered nervously. "Do you see something amiss?"

Lumian eased his worry. His luck appears to be relatively normal and stable. He smiled, raising his right hand and giving a wave behind Charlie's back.

"Good morning, Susanna!"

Charlie spun around, eyes wide open, scrutinizing every detail.

A few seconds later, he exhaled and turned back, forcing a smile. He addressed Lumian, "You're just messing with me again."

That name remained a haunting nightmare he couldn't shake off anytime soon.

"I'm strengthening your mental endurance. This way, if something truly occurs, you won't panic and find yourself unable to devise a solution." Lumian earnestly patted Charlie's shoulder.

Moments before 10:30 a.m., Lumian made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise.

Upon his arrival, Louis and Sarkota approached simultaneously, their voices merging into one as they spoke. "Boss, something's up!"

"What's the matter?" Lumian inquired with a smile, seemingly oblivious to the anxiety and unease radiating from his two subordinates.

Louis glanced towards the staircase, lowering his voice. "Red Boots, Giant, and Rat are all here. It must be something serious."

Every leader present? Lumian pondered his recent actions and found it hard to believe that he hadn't offended all the leaders of the Savoie Mob.

I've been on my best behavior these past few days!

"Indeed," Louis confirmed with a solemn nod.

Lumian ascended the second-floor stairs nonchalantly, where Franca and the others awaited.

Franca had swapped her footwear for darker red boots. She sported light-colored pants and a trendy dark skirt that had gained popularity in Trier recently. Completing her ensemble was a more masculine formal attire.

With her right leg crossed over her left, Franca grinned at Lumian as he approached.

To her right was Baron Brignais, donned in a formal suit and top hat. On her left was a slender-faced man, barely reaching a height of 1.6 meters, boasting a pair of rat-like whiskers. He wore a dark brown shirt that fell short, and his thick, grayish-black hair framed his countenance. His dark blue eyes revealed a trace of anxiety.

"'Rat' Christo," Baron Brignais courteously introduced Lumian to the thin-faced man.

Baron Brignais then gestured towards the man seated opposite him. "'Blood Palm' Black."

Black possessed brown hair, blue eyes, and a round face. He appeared to be in his early thirties and had a warm smile that hardly resembled that of a mob leader.

Clad in attire leaning more towards formality, his hands were large, with clearly defined bones beneath the surface. He held a slowly smoldering cigar.

"Good morning, everyone." Lumian dragged an armchair closer and settled in, positioning himself nearly a meter away from the table, assuming the air of someone in control.

"Giant" Simon glanced at him, took a drag from his cigarette, and exhaled a cloud of grayish-blue smoke.

"Christo met with some trouble and requires our assistance."

"What sort of trouble?" Lumian directed his gaze towards "Rat" Christo.

Christo played a vital role in Salle de Bal Brise's lucrative business.

Despite the premium he charged for the smuggled liquor he peddled, its lack of taxation made it significantly cheaper than the wholesale liquor stores in Trier. Moreover, a substantial portion of the alcohol Christo dealt with was moonshine, cleverly adorned with labels from relatively renowned brands and origins.

Gritting his teeth, Christo, who bore a striking resemblance to a rat, spoke up.

"I've lost a shipment underground. The delivery men and escorts have vanished. Damn it, my younger brother was among them. His wife and child are in tears at my place!"

Something has transpired in Underground Trier? Smuggling operations are divided into carriers and armed protection? That's right. Osta Trul had mentioned helping others transport illicit books. Horse-drawn carriages are useless in Underground Trier; they rely solely on manual labor… Lumian nodded subtly and inquired, "What kind of goods?"

"A batch of red wine and brandy, along with some Blackfish." "Rat" Christo couldn't help but slam the table. "Damn it, we've taken that route countless times. Nothing ever happened, nor did we encounter those hyenas."

The term “hyenas” referred to the quarry police, who specialized in cracking down on smuggling activities and maintained order in the underground.

Observing Lumian’s confusion, Baron Brignais casually explained, “‘Blackfish’ refers to firearms.”

Among the mob’s top five lucrative ventures, the bootleg alcohol supply chain ranked second. Firearms, due to low demand, brought in the least profit. The casino business, which was the most lucrative, wasn’t particularly favored in the market district, given the modest incomes of the local population. The money one could extract from the patrons was rather limited. Compared to gambling, which required wit, those who toiled all day preferred indulging in cheap liquor, gyrating their bodies, and seeking solace in the company of captivating dancers.

Regarding the sale of psychotropic drugs, the police department in Trier cracked down heavily on it. Following repeated warnings from the market district’s police headquarters, Salle de Bal Brise had put an end to such incidents. However, Rue du Rossignol, overseen by “Giant” Simon, occasionally experienced a few cases.

Lumian turned to “Rat” Christo and spoke, “Any suspects?”

“None,” Christo lamented. “Damn it, that route is incredibly well-concealed. Apart from me and my men, no one in the market district is aware of it.”

He paused for a moment before sharing his intentions.

“I need your help to search for clues along that route, using your expertise. I’ve gone through it myself, but found nothing.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, Franca nodded and suggested, “Let’s form pairs to ensure safety during the investigation.

“Right, I’ll team up with Ciel. There’s something I need to discuss with him.”

“Giant” Simon’s gaze flickered between Franca and Ciel a few times before he recalled that Ciel was suspected of sleeping with Franca’s mistress, thus cuckolding her.

Seizing the opportunity to teach Ciel a lesson, “Giant” Simon nodded imperceptibly and said to “Blood Palm” Black, “You and I will be a team.”

Baron Brignais then turned to “Rat” Christo. “I’ll accompany you for your second trip.”

After Baron Brignais and “Giant” Simon scoured the underground route to no avail, Lumian and Franca followed a smuggler into Underground Trier.

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Chapter 186 - 186 Strange Footprints

186 Strange Footprints

Holding an iron-black carbide lamp, Franca glanced at the path between stone pillars and asked the smuggler, Fernandez, who was leading the way, in a state of confusion, “Doesn’t this lead to Quartier de l’Observatoire?”

Though Underground Trier was a complex maze, the tunnels on this level had street names corresponding to the surface. After pondering for a moment, Franca realized they were going in the wrong direction.

Smuggling operations certainly entailed entering the city from its outskirts, and Quartier de l’Observatoire was positioned closer to the center of Trier compared to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. The district stood on the other side of the Srenzo River, effectively separating it from Avenue du Boulevard.

Fernandez, a smuggler associated with “Rat” Christo, turned around with a smile and explained, “The hidden route we’re taking leads to Quartier de l’Observatoire. We always deliver the goods to the warehouse there.”

“Is that so?” Franca slowed down and increased the distance between herself and Fernandez, who wore a brown felt hat.

Since they hadn’t entered the smuggling route yet, she lowered her voice and conversed with Lumian.

“I remember you traded your Pugilist Beyonder characteristic for 18,000 verl d’or with Gardner. You know it’s a Beyonder characteristic, right? Or rather, do you grasp a Beyonder characteristic’s true meaning?”

“My sister mentioned it before.” Lumian attributed his knowledge to Aurore.

Franca was tall and had long legs, making it effortless for her to keep up with Lumian.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she sighed and commented, “It’s fortunate to have someone to guide you. In the past, we were stumbling around like blind mice, relying on ourselves to figure things out. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have made the choice…”

Her voice trailed off, ending with a long sigh.

This reminded Lumian of a saying, either spoken by Aurore herself or relayed from Emperor Roselle’s famous words: “Once you make a grave mistake, it will

haunt you for a lifetime."

Franca quickly regained her composure and whispered to Lumian, "You've just entered the field of mysticism. Apart from knowledge, you're lacking much more.

"It's best not to be frugal with that sum of money. Use it to purchase a mystical item or a Beyonder weapon to compensate for a Hunter's limitations in mysticism. Otherwise, if 'Black Scorpion' Roger truly seeks revenge against you, he won't need to go through much trouble. He can simply summon a few undead to hunt you down. If you have such intentions, I'll keep an eye out for you."

Lumian chuckled.

"I've already made a purchase."

"So quickly?" Franca nearly lost control of her voice, causing smuggler Fernandez to glance back.

The carbide lamps cast intersecting shadows, obstructing Lumian's view of Fernandez's expression. He couldn't discern what thoughts they triggered.

Lumian replied "honestly," "Before joining the Savoie Mob, I discovered a circle of Beyonders through Psychic's gathering of mysticism enthusiasts. There, I exchanged the verl d'or that the Boss gave me for a mystical item."

"No wonder…" Franca revealed a knowing expression and praised Lumian. "Your mind is even sharper than I imagined. Hmm, is it an item that enhances your mysticism abilities?"

Lumian spoke frankly, "A pair of Lawyer glasses, but they seem to have been tainted by some strange power."

Franca's brow furrowed ever so slightly as she interrupted Lumian. "That's highly dangerous."

"I know," Lumian explained with a smile. "But as long as I choose the right environment and take precautions, it won't be too risky. Besides, it offers excellent disguises and mysticism techniques…"

Lumian briefly recounted his urge to paint after donning the Mystery Prying Glasses.

Franca's ponytail bobbed behind her head.

"It's certainly useful. If I were in your shoes, I'd make the same choice.

"Only the leaders and thugs of the Poison Spur Mob haven't really interacted with you. They only know you by your peculiar hair color. Otherwise, they would have recognized your true identity by now. They wouldn't have needed to act themselves. They could have sought revenge by sharing your information and wanted posters with the police headquarters and the two cathedrals."

Lumian chuckled.

“That’s right. I can already set up a coffee meeting with Officer Everett.”

Franca’s vibrant lake-like eyes sparkled as she said, “You’ve shared so much with me about the mysticism gathering and your trump cards. Jenna even kept telling me how cunning and deceptive you are. Yet, you’re truly sincere and straightforward! Of course, our relationship is different from others. I knew it. Muggle’s brother isn’t that kind of person!”

For a moment, Lumian felt a twinge of guilt. He spoke sincerely, “Yes, she completely misunderstood me.”

After chatting for a while, they finally reached the outskirts of Quartier de l’Observatoire’s underground area and turned into a southward tunnel.

Soon, Fernandez halted in front of a secondary well belonging to an abandoned quarry.

He positioned the carbide lamp at the mouth of the well and gestured downward.

“Let’s go in.”

With the aid of the blue light, Lumian peered down into the depths of the well. It had been neglected for a long time and appeared to be completely blocked by gravel.

Using the recess in the well wall, ropes concealed in the shadows, and a basic iron ladder fastened to the moss, the three of them descended and swiftly reached the well’s bottom.

Fernandez moved a few seemingly heavy rocks, revealing a narrow tunnel at the well’s edge, wide enough for one person.

As they traversed the tunnel, which emitted a foul stench, the passageway ahead widened, as if they had entered another section of the quarry cave.

The air grew eerily still and darkness enveloped them. The cave ceiling was damp, with scarce traces of moss.

Lumian and Franca, each holding a carbide lamp, slowed their pace and meticulously examined the various signs along the smuggling route.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Fernandez pointed to a nearby tunnel.

“Our boss and Baron Brignais weren’t entirely fruitless. They discovered that the caravan’s tracks vanished into thin air over there.”

It was a tunnel connecting two sections of the quarry cave. The path was strewn with rubble and potholes. In the distance, darkness prevailed, devoid of any light.

Lumian and Franca swiftly located the relatively fresh footprints that had abruptly vanished. They squatted down, closely examining them.

“Only footprints going in. The ones coming back end right here. Most people returning carry heavy loads. Their footprints are deeper, distinctly different from when they came… We can rule out the possibility of them turning around and retracing their steps…” Lumian swiftly made a series of deductions.

Franca averted her gaze from her surroundings and stood up.

“No signs of a struggle. It’s incredibly peculiar!”

She then motioned for Fernandez to move further away and wait in the quarry cave.

As Fernandez’s carbide lamp glow faded into the distance, Franca produced a small makeup box and a white handkerchief with a blue checkered pattern.

The handkerchief belonged to “Rat” Christo’s brother, Erkin, who had also gone missing during the smuggling operation.

Franca placed the carbide lamp down, opened the light-gold box, and ran her fingers over the mirror inside.

Meanwhile, holding the handkerchief, she repeated in a whisper, “Erkin’s current whereabouts, Erkin’s current whereabouts…”

The already dim tunnel grew even more stifling. The light from the two carbide lamps was pushed back by an invisible force, and the palm-sized mirror emitted a watery glow, as though revealing the depths of a dark river.

Before Lumian could count to three, a scene materialized on the mirror’s surface.

Laborers lugging wooden crates and smugglers armed with revolvers and rifles trudged through the tunnel. As they progressed, the darkness behind them engulfed the space where the light had receded. Eventually, the carbide lamp’s glow vanished from view, and the mirror’s surface turned pitch-black.

“They did vanish in this area.” Franca ended her divination, her thin red lips pressed together. “But I can’t discern anything further.”

Lumian didn’t suggest trying the Mystery Prying Glasses. From his perspective, Trier’s underground was a treacherous place, concealing all manner of secrets. There were ruins from the Fourth Epoch, foul-smelling old bones, catacombs with specific rules to follow, and the lingering Montsouris ghost that had defied eradication for years. They were all elements that instilled fear in those seeking the truth. If he were to use the Mystery Prying Glasses to survey the surroundings, there was a high chance he would explode on the spot.

In due time, Trier's underground would boast another legend entwined with the power of an evil god.

Therefore, Lumian would lend a hand out of consideration for the Savoie Mob's boss, but he wouldn't go all out and take unnecessary risks.

After all, it was "Rat" Christo who suffered the loss. What did it have to do with him, "Lion" Ciel?

Salle de Bal Brise still had an abundant supply of alcohol!

Franca glanced at him, not intending to make things difficult.

Red Boots stowed away the makeup box and Erkin's handkerchief, picked up the carbide lamp, and said to Lumian,

"Let's return and find Fernandez. Let him guide us forward. Perhaps there are other clues left behind."

"Alright." Lumian felt that Franca was merely fulfilling her duty as a member of the Savoie Mob.

The two turned around, carrying their carbide lamps, and ventured back toward the original quarry cave, plunging into the ever-deepening darkness.

After taking a dozen steps, Lumian abruptly halted, his expression growing grave.

"What's the matter?" Franca asked, perplexed.

Lumian's voice resonated with gravity as he directed her attention to the scattered rubble and pockmarked ground.

"No more footprints. The smugglers' tracks from their departure and our own as we crossed have vanished! But there's a trail of footprints carrying a heavy load leading forward!"

Franca's heart skipped a beat. She peered ahead, coming to the realization that the ground lay in disarray. The footprints left by her, Lumian, and Fernandez in the tunnel had vanished, replaced by the sudden reappearance of the missing caravan's tracks out of thin air!

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Chapter 187 - 187 Shadow

187 Shadow

“Dammit!” Franca exclaimed with frustration, her voice filled with intensity.

She scanned her surroundings, her mind racing as she pondered and speculated.

“Did we stumble upon the same thing that the missing caravan encountered? Entering that tunnel transported us to another world, erasing the original footprints? Did we vanish into thin air in Fernandez’s eyes?”

Lumian had never faced such a situation before, nor had his sister Aurore written about anything similar in her novels. He couldn’t make sense of what was happening.

Lost in thought, his brows furrowed, Lumian suddenly heard Franca’s conjecture.

How imaginative… Lumian’s initial reaction was a deep sigh before he contemplated the possibilities.

The more he considered it, the more he realized that Franca’s words were eerily similar to their current predicament. He knelt down and examined the footprints once again.

“Indeed, the footprints suddenly appear with the weight of something heavy,” Lumian said, gesturing to a dozen steps behind him.

That was the same spot they had previously traversed, yet there were no traces of their passage.

Franca clenched her teeth and spoke up.

“It seems we truly have entered another world. Or rather, an underground realm…

“Dammit it! Why did this happen to us? Christo, Brignais, Simon, and Black encountered nothing and safely returned to the surface!”

Uh… Lumian suddenly felt a twinge of guilt at Red Boots’s questioning of destiny.

Crouched on the ground, he instinctively raised his hand and touched his left chest.

Was this somehow inevitable?

Yes, I can't dismiss the possibility that it's Franca's doing. Her Sequence is higher than mine, and she carries a mystical item that may hold some secrets… Lumian quickly gathered himself.

Franca looked down at her companion and muttered to herself, "Could it be linked to one of our Sequences? Alternatively, it might be the adverse effect of your glasses."

Lumian replied thoughtfully, "Hunter and Demoness are neighboring pathways."

In other words, if this problem stemmed from the convergence of Beyonder attributes, the two of them couldn't escape responsibility.

Of course, at Lumian and Franca's level, the convergence of Beyonder attributes wouldn't have such obvious effects. However, Lumian recalled encountering two Demonesses less than two weeks after arriving in Trier, and he was only a Sequence 8. He suspected that the power of Inevitability had transformed convergence into something fated to occur.

Hmm… Franca fell into deep thought.

After a few seconds, she clenched her teeth and spoke.

"Perhaps this encounter is truly a problem with our pathway, but why did Christo's smuggling caravan enter this space and mysteriously vanish in reality? They've traversed this route countless times without any issues. Why is it different now? Dammit! That blasted rat must not have spilled all the beans! He wasn't just smuggling alcohol and firearms this time. There's something else, something linked to mysticism?"

Franca was reluctantly swayed. She exhaled and said, "Now is not the time to dissect the cause. What matters is finding a way out. Sigh, why is Underground Trier intertwined with the abnormalities of the Hunter and Demoness pathways? Uh…"

Franca fell silent abruptly, as if recalling something.

"Have you figured something out?" Lumian stood up.

Franca pondered before responding.

"I don't know if your sister ever mentioned anything about the Fourth Epoch. Uh, she might not even be aware. In short, Trier during the Fourth Epoch served as the capital of the Tudor Dynasty, and the Blood Emperor who ruled the empire was likely a High Sequence Beyonder of the Hunter pathway. Furthermore, the Demoness family of that era shared a certain connection with one or several prominent nobles of the Tudor Dynasty. It's reasonable for them to have left something behind in Trier."

"Demoness family?" Lumian was taken aback by the term.

Franca pursed her lips.

“In the Fourth Epoch, the Demoness pathway was under the control of a specific family. Sigh, since I chose the Assassin pathway, I could only do my best to gather relevant information, but I still lack substantial knowledge.”

Lumian steered the conversation back on track.

“Do you suspect that this space is linked to the sunken Fourth Epoch Trier?”

“Yes,” Franca replied vaguely, not ruling out the possibility. She contemplated for a moment before adding, “The two Churches must have dealt with the ruins to some extent. If we can find the corresponding node, we should be able to escape.”

Carrying the carbide lamp, Lumian once again examined the ground.

“Should we press on or turn back?

“Christo’s smuggling caravan doesn’t seem to have noticed anything amiss. They’re still moving forward.”

Franca pondered for a few seconds and said, “Let’s go back to the spot where we entered this space and investigate. It’s just a few steps away. We won’t waste much time.”

“Alright.” Lumian walked toward the center of the tunnel.

Soon, he and Franca stood at the place where the smuggling caravan’s tracks had materialized out of thin air, attempting to take a step forward.

There was no trace of footprints ahead.

After walking another dozen steps, the darkness deepened. Only Lumian’s and Franca’s footprints remained on the path.

They had not returned to reality.

“Wait.” Franca raised her right hand, signaling to halt. “Let’s turn back and head to the quarry cave we came from. We need to see if Fernandez has entered this space.”

Lumian didn’t object.

It could help them further determine the nature of the problem.

Guided by the bluish glow of their carbide lamps, Lumian and Franca followed the tracks left by the smuggling caravan.

Before long, they reached the quarry cave.

A figure stood at the boundary of light and darkness, with its back turned towards them.

Franca exclaimed with delight, “Fernandez!”

It seemed that the smuggler had also entered this space. Perhaps the problem didn’t lie with her or Ciel!

However, Franca’s expression tightened as soon as she finished speaking.

Simultaneously, Lumian spoke in a deep voice, “Something’s off.”

Fernandez, the smuggler, had been carrying a carbide lamp. There was no way he would just stand there in the darkness!

In the next moment, the figure turned around.

Under the illumination of Lumian and Franca’s carbide lamps, a bloodied face came into view.

The man had short flaxen hair, thick brown eyebrows, and lake-blue eyes.

His lips were thin, and his appearance was unremarkable. Yet, his eyes radiated indescribable malice and hatred.

At that moment, sticky blood stained the man’s face, as if it might drip at any moment.

It’s not Fernandez! Why does he look familiar… Lumian assessed the situation as he reached for the black revolver concealed under his arm.

With a clang, Franca’s carbide lamp fell to the ground.

Startled by the noise and the flickering light, the figure darted into the darkness and disappeared into a tunnel connecting to the cavern.

“What’s wrong?” Lumian turned to Franca.

As a Sequence 7 Beyonder, a member of a secret organization, and an experienced combatant, she shouldn’t be displaying such abnormal behavior and exaggerated reactions!

Franca gazed into the darkness for a few seconds before speaking, “That… that was my past self…”

Your past self, when you were still a man? Lumian was alarmed.

An unsettling feeling crept over him as he asked in a low voice, “You mean, before you drank the Witch potion?”

“Yes.” Franca bent down and retrieved her carbide lamp, confusion and fear etched on her face. “I thought no one in this world would remember that face except for me… Why? Why am I seeing it here? Is it generated from my memories? Can’t our memories be kept secret in this space?”

Wouldn’t that be a good thing? Lumian’s initial reaction was one of excitement.

If this space could reveal the hidden memories of his subconscious, he could begin piecing together the truth of the Cordu disaster!

As for whether this space might intrude on something it shouldn’t and risk severe corruption and damage, he paid it no mind.

With his carbide lamp and revolver in hand, Lumian cautiously circled the empty quarry. He found no other figures or anything related to his past.

Disheartened, he expressed his disappointment to Franca, “I couldn’t find my past self.”

“Could it be that it’s not a memory from the past, but rather something from the future?” Franca suggested returning to the secondary well that had brought them to this level. By searching for more anomalies along the way, they might be able to infer the nature of this space and find a way to leave.

Side by side, they traversed the quarry cave, following the footprints left by the smuggling caravan, heading towards the edge of Quartier de l’Observatoire.

As time went on, Lumian and Franca noticed something on the ground almost simultaneously.

They were scattered droplets of blood, mingled with the disordered footprints of the smuggling caravan.

“Are the abnormalities starting to manifest?” Franca whispered.

Lumian nodded.

“If we proceed further, we might encounter those people.” He glanced at Franca and added, “Although they may no longer be human.”

Franca scoffed.

“Are you trying to frighten me? Do you think that will scare me? Whether they’re corpses or monsters, it’s within my expectations.

“Remember, the most terrifying thing in this world is the unknown.”

Just as Franca finished speaking, Lumian’s expression froze, illuminated by the glow of the carbide lamp.

“You’re still trying to frighten me…” Before Franca could finish her sentence, she felt something warm sliding from her nose and falling to the ground.

It was a drop of bright red blood.

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Chapter 188 - 188 Confidence

188 Confidence

“Dammit!”

Franca couldn’t help but blurt out her usual modal particle. With a quick swipe of her index finger across her nose, her hand revealed a bright red stain. The sight alone sent a shiver down her spine.

Franca snorted.

In an instant, black flames flickered in her nostrils, fingers, and the blood on the ground, swiftly vanishing into thin air.

Catching Lumian’s gaze, Franca, slightly contorted from the pain, forced herself to enlighten him.

“We can’t leave our blood in this unknown place. Otherwise, unimaginable horrors may unfold. Hey, why are you unharmed?”

From Franca’s perspective, she surpassed Ciel in terms of Sequence and experience. There was no reason for him to emerge unscathed while she suffered!

“Perhaps I’m fine for now,” Lumian patronizingly responded, pondering thoughtfully. “Maybe the shadow we encountered represented the old you, not the old me.”

“So why did we come across the old me and not the old you?” Franca eyed Lumian suspiciously.

Could this bloke be hiding another secret?

Lumian pondered for a moment before answering.

“Perhaps this space is more intertwined with Demonesses.”

“Could be…” Franca fell into deep contemplation.

After a few seconds, she pointed towards the footprints and blood droplets on the ground and suggested, “Let’s catch up and investigate. The current condition of those people could reveal our future and help us prepare in advance.”

Lumian responded with action, walking into the darkness that swallowed the footprints and blood droplets.

The yellowish-blue light of the carbide lamp quietly resisted the encroaching darkness.

As they tracked further, the abnormalities on their bodies became increasingly apparent. Warm blood began to trickle from Lumian's nose, while crimson liquid seeped from Franca's eyes, gums, skin, and ears.

With her black flames, not a drop of blood remained.

Finally, they "returned" to the secondary well, where the tracks of the smuggling caravan and the slowly congealing blood abruptly vanished.

Whether it was the tunnel leading to the secondary well or the path to other areas, there were no traces left.

"They vanished again?" Franca, her face enveloped in black flames, frowned.

Lumian, his nose sealed by the black flames, took a deep breath and smiled.

"This might be our end. When the blood reaches a certain point, our bodies will gradually fade away."

Lumian chuckled.

"So what if I do? Too many negative emotions will only cloud my thinking."

"Sometimes, I reckon you're more mature than me." Franca sighed.

"Did you just figure that out?" Lumian naturally wouldn't mention that he was both sincerely pondering the issue and confident.

Compared to Cordu, trapped in an endless loop, at least there was no sign of terrifying power in this place!

Moreover, Lumian didn't need to rack his brain to come up with several escape strategies.

The first option was to take a risky move by using the Mystery Prying Glasses to explore the surroundings from different angles and locate an exit.

Secondly, he could try throwing out Mr. K's finger to establish a connection, hoping it would create a passageway.

Thirdly, summoning Madame Hela or the messenger of Madam Magician was another possibility. If it succeeded, it would mean that this place wasn't entirely cut off from the spirit world. The two ladies might have a way to forcefully extract Lumian and Franca.

Fourthly, if all else failed, he could set up an altar and offer prayers to the mysterious ruler beyond the gray fog. Such a bizarre space couldn't restrict a great

entity. Even the cycle of fate orchestrated by the evil god couldn't shield them from His watchful eye, let alone this place.

Lastly, if the great entity remained unresponsive, Lumian could perform a ritual and beseech for a boon. He could activate the black thorn symbol on his chest, allowing the sealed evil god's corruption to amplify. This disruption might create a vulnerability in the workings of this space.

You can be as calm and composed as me when you have numerous untried methods and believe there's a high chance of escaping this place… Lumian criticized inwardly, feeling somewhat perplexed.

It felt like he had forgotten something important, but it eluded his memory momentarily.

Franca retrieved a light-gold makeup box, opened it, and placed it on the ground.

Her form swiftly faded away, leaving no trace behind.

The aqueous light within the palm-sized mirror flickered, illuminating Franca's figure.

How magical… Lumian sighed, marveling at the sight.

Franca glanced around within the mirror for a few seconds before vanishing.

She reappeared across from Lumian, shaking her head, and uttered, "I can't find a way out by relying on the mirror…"

Without awaiting Lumian's response, the Witch attempted several more methods, but all proved futile.

Finally, she caressed the mirror inside the makeup box, seeking guidance from her spirituality.

In such a place, she hesitated to perform Magic mirror divination, fearing a perilous and dreadful connection.

"The way out… The way out…" Franca repeated the divination phrase in Hermes several times, and the mirror darkened, resembling a moonlit lake.

The shimmering aqueous light reflected a figure.

It was Lumian—wearing a wide-brimmed round hat, a white shirt, a brown jacket, and dark pants. Black flames flickered subtly at his nose.

"Uh…" Franca turned around, looking at her companion by her side.

She furrowed her brow slightly and stated, "Finding the exit with your glasses? Isn't that too dangerous?"

Congratulations on finally uncovering the simplest among my five solutions… Lumian pondered and remarked, “This is no longer the true Underground Trier, nor does it seem to be directly linked to the ruins of the Fourth Epoch. As long as we protect ourselves, we should be able to endure any peril.”

“Protect…” Franca repeated the word with a smile. “I happen to excel at that!”

With a swift motion of her right hand, she extinguished the black flames on Lumian’s nose.

After a few seconds, a drop of bright red liquid trickled down, caught by Franca’s open palm.

Then, she conjured fresh black flames, sealing Lumian’s nostrils once again.

The mild burning sensation was tolerable for Alms Monk Lumian. He asked cautiously, “What are you doing with my blood, a curse?”

Franca chuckled.

“Do I need to go through all this trouble just to kill you? I’ll perform a Mirror Substitution to shield you from the danger of using those glasses.”

As she spoke, she retrieved a palm-sized mirror and smeared Lumian’s blood upon it.

She has so many mirrors… Are they the essence of a Witch’s spells? Lumian observed Franca’s busy movements, enlightened and slightly envious.

Franca turned her head and addressed him, “Give me two strands of your hair.”

Without hesitation, Lumian plucked two strands and handed them over.

A black flame appeared in Franca’s hand, incinerating the golden strands.

She sprinkled the ashes onto the mirror’s surface and stroked it with her black-flamed palm while murmuring an inaudible incantation.

When the black flames suddenly receded into the mirror, the traces of blood and hair vanished.

“Do not stray more than 30 meters away from me,” Franca cautioned, holding the seemingly ordinary mirror.

Lumian nodded and retrieved the Mystery Prying Glasses from his pocket.

He placed the brown gold-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose, but his right hand remained gripping the mirror holder, ready to remove the glasses at a moment’s notice.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian beheld a multitude of scenes:

Faces concealed in darkness, pallid and ferocious, drenched in blood.

A mass of dark hair floated amidst the shadows, comprised of hundreds or perhaps thousands of strands, extending in various directions.

Lingering figures, rock walls shimmering with aqueous light, and an impenetrable darkness.

In the pond-like puddle, a colossal, swollen, and pallid face lurked beneath the lightless surface, peering outward.

There was a glistening cave…

Light… Cave… Lumian's intuition instantaneously struck, compelling his dizzy mind to focus on the edge of the scene.

The luminous-filled cave rapidly enlarged, revealing a dimly lit passage beyond.

As the cave drew nearer, Lumian realized it was merely a reflection in a mirror. Its surface was solid and inaccessible.

The mirror sank to the depths of the lightless pool.

Suddenly, the colossal, swollen, and pallid face swiftly expanded before Lumian's eyes, consuming his field of vision.

Lumian's sight darkened, and he nearly lost consciousness.

Vaguely, he "saw" his flesh attempting to depart from his skeleton.

Whack!

Lumian heard a crisp shattering sound, and his mind cleared.

He swiftly removed the Mystery Prying Glasses and retched.

After he regained his composure, Franca inquired with concern, "Are you alright?"

At some point, the mirror in her hand had shattered into countless fragments, scattered across the ground.

Lumian took a deep breath and replied, "I'm fine now."

He extended his finger, indicating a specific direction.

"Over a hundred meters from the tunnel, there lies a massive puddle. And at the puddle's depths, you'll find a mirror. That mirror reflects a cave, which leads to a

path of light.

“However, be warned, for within that puddle lurks a perilous monster. I nearly died when I beheld its visage.”

Franca listened in silence, her mutterings a mixture of confusion and frustration.

“Goddammit, could this place truly be connected to a Demoness?”

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Chapter 189 - 189 Cooperation

189 Cooperation

Observing Lumian's perplexed gaze, Franca provided a succinct explanation, "One of the core abilities of the Demoness pathway revolves around mirrors and manipulating the world within them.

"When I suspected that this place might be connected to the Demoness or Hunter pathway, I pondered whether we inadvertently stepped into a certain location within the mirror world. Thus, I attempted to use the makeup mirror to see if I could escape through it. As you witnessed, it proved fruitless.

"Because of this, I have tentatively dismissed the notion of being in a mirror world or encountering a relic belonging to a Demoness. However, now we have stumbled upon a submerged mirror that likely conceals an exit…"

"So, you suspect that this is a specific place within the mirror world, restricted to certain mirrors?" Lumian attempted to grasp Franca's line of thinking.

"Exactly," Franca replied with a gentle nod. "But what perplexes me is how we found ourselves here without encountering anything resembling a mirror. Perhaps my conjecture is incorrect, or only partially true…"

Lumian pondered for a moment, hoping to glean some knowledge. He posed a sincere question: "What exactly is a mirror world?"

Franca grabbed the ponytail at the back of her head.

"Explaining it to you is a challenge since I am not entirely certain myself.

"Allow me to elucidate based on my understanding. In mysticism, mirrors possess distinct symbolic meanings, such as one's reflection or an entrance to another realm. The former suggests that we can use mirrors to create substitutes, while the latter alludes to a mirror world.

"It is often associated with terror, mystery, horror, and the bizarre. I cannot ascertain whether there are hidden elements or if it truly represents an alternate dimension. However, I do know that the mirror world connects to various mirror-like entities. It could potentially point to spaces that are typically inaccessible. As my Sequence progresses, I should be capable of utilizing the mirror world to swiftly traverse different locations."

Lumian recalled the recent events and allowed his imagination to run wild.

“Could the version of you we saw be a reflection left behind in the mirror world from a previous encounter, before you became a Witch? That would explain why I have never encountered my past self.”

“That is a plausible explanation, but I haven’t come across anything peculiar…” Franca deliberated for a moment. “If that is the case, we must hurry to the puddle immediately. The exit is most likely there! We can no longer afford to proceed cautiously or wait any longer. As I mentioned earlier, the mirror world harbors eerie and terrifying phenomena. If we linger here any further, I dread to imagine what might befall us!”

“Very well.” Lumian maintained his composure.

Franca turned and sprinted, with Lumian closely following her.

As the Witch ran, it appeared as though she employed some form of ability. Small patches of frost materialized beneath her feet, causing a sharp reduction in friction. Her body seemed weightless as she gracefully glided through the dim quarry cave and into the depths of the underground tunnel.

Utilizing all his strength as a Hunter and Dancer, Lumian struggled to keep pace with Franca and avoid being left behind.

In the wintry chill, a thin layer of ice gradually formed on the walls of the surrounding rocks.

Upon the icy surface, visages stained with blood emerged. Their countenances contorted, eyes brimming with hatred, resembling vengeful specters emerging from the depths of hell.

Among them was the previous incarnation of Franca, when she still appeared as a man!

After sprinting for a while, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the puddle.

As the light from the carbide lamp cast its glow, the puddle’s surface shimmered with a tinge of yellowish-blue.

“Is this it?” Franca halted abruptly.

In that moment, every fiber of his being throbbed with pain, as if his body was on the brink of bursting, save for the fiery sensation in his nasal cavity.

Holding the carbide lamp tightly, Franca cautiously approached the puddle.

“The challenge now is how to elude the monster you encountered and locate the mirror. Regrettably, I cannot yet traverse between mirrors. I can only remain inside for a few fleeting seconds…

“I will divert its attention and keep it occupied for a while. Why don’t you dive underwater and retrieve the mirror?”

Lumian spoke plainly, “I don’t believe you stand a chance against it. It nearly overwhelmed me when I caught a glimpse of it.”

“…” Though Franca felt a twinge of annoyance and frustration, she had to acknowledge that Lumian spoke the truth.

With her Sequence and mystical item, she could still hold her ground even against a Beyonder one rank higher. However, judging by the monster’s display, it far surpassed her by more than a single rank!

After a brief pause, Franca clenched her teeth and uttered,

“Even if I am outmatched, my skills in escape and self-preservation are formidable. I should be able to hold out against it for more than ten seconds. If you can retrieve the mirror within that timeframe, we can make our escape!”

Lumian let out a chuckle.

“We shouldn’t risk our lives just yet.

“I have a plan to stall that monster for ten to twenty seconds without taking excessive risks. And I trust you can locate that mirror, correct?”

“I’m capable. I have a unique method of detecting mirrors,” Franca eyed Lumian skeptically. “Are you truly up to the task? Is there genuinely no danger involved?”

“In theory, the risks are minimal,” Lumian replied calmly.

Simultaneously, he silently added, If the risks prove too great, I’ll find an alternative. Mr. K, Madame Hela, Madam Magician, the great being, and the power of Inevitability are all viable options.

Franca wasted no time and pursed her lips as she spoke, “Alright, just to be safe, I’ll create a Mirror Substitute for you.”

Naturally, Lumian had no objections to something that could effectively reduce the risk.

After Franca produced a small mirror and crafted the corresponding substitute, Lumian gripped the ritual silver dagger and encircled the pond-like puddle, creating a spiritual barrier.

Throughout the process, he maintained a distance of four to five meters from the water’s edge, fearing the monster would drag him under.

Putting away the ritual silver dagger, Lumian turned to Franca with a genuine smile.

“What comes next involves one of my secrets. Could you turn around?”

“Very well.” Franca was content with his straightforwardness.

She inwardly sighed once more.

Does Jenna misunderstand Ciel?

As Franca turned around, Lumian placed the carbide lamp aside and began the Summoning Dance.

He intended to summon the monster, but he wouldn’t allow it to possess him!

Lumian believed that the higher the level of a peculiar creature, the more aware it would be of the corruption within his body. This made it less inclined to attach itself to him.

In other words, as long as he refrained from issuing commands that would influence the monster, it was likely to observe the Summoning Dance eagerly, waiting for an opportunity to attack. However, it was intimidated by the seal and the corruption and dared not act upon its thoughts. It would only truly engage him once the dance concluded.

The Summoning Dance lasted for 20 to 30 seconds, ample time for Franca to submerge herself and locate the mirror.

As long as Lumian could escape this world before the monster attacked, there would be no further issues!

Of course, if he couldn’t harness the corresponding powers of nature in this place and allow the Summoning Dance to take effect, he could always employ an alternative method.

Amidst the contorted and frenzied dance, Lumian’s spirituality stirred the forces of nature, forming a connection that dissipated into the surroundings, only to be obstructed by the spiritual barrier.

After a few seconds, ripples appeared on the surface of the puddle, and a pallid figure emerged, floating above the water.

It bore a resemblance to a human, with an inflated body and a gargantuan face occupying half its form.

The monster floated toward Lumian and came to a stop in close proximity.

Lumian dared not gaze directly at it. With his eyes half-shut, he called out, “Hurry!”

Without hesitation, Franca discarded the carbide lamp, took two steps, and leaped into the water.

With a splash, water splattered around.

A cold, damp sensation penetrated Franca's skin as near darkness enveloped her vision.

Guided by the faint glow of the carbide lamp seeping through the water, Franca swiftly descended to the depths.

Suddenly, dark creatures resembling seaweed extended their hair-like tendrils, slithering around Franca as if alive.

Franca paid them no mind and continued her descent.

Just as the "seaweed" was about to touch her, it unexpectedly burst into black flames.

The black flames burned silently underwater, showing no signs of extinguishing. The "seaweed" didn't turn to ash, but their consciousness was snuffed out.

They floated in the water, swaying with the currents.

Farther away, a multitude of seaweed continued to surge forward, obstructed by layers of condensed frost.

Beside the puddle, Lumian, engrossed in the Summoning Dance, did not look at the monster. However, he heard a sound akin to a bubble popping. A putrid odor wafted towards him, accompanied by an enveloping chill.

An image flashed across Lumian's mind:

The bloated monster with its enormous face was less than a step away from him, almost clinging to his back. He could even perceive its "breath"!

Hiss… Lumian instinctively gasped, refusing to interrupt the Summoning Dance.

In the water, Franca, having dived deeper, finally sensed the presence of the mirror!

Her form suddenly faded, vanishing from her original position.

Franca's figure swiftly materialized on the ancient silver mirror resting silently on the seabed.

She retrieved the artifact and swam towards the surface, a look of joy adorning her face.

She had just confirmed that this mirror truly led to the underground tunnel in the outside world!

Beside the puddle, Lumian was filled with anxiety as he kept his gaze fixed on the water's surface. The Summoning Dance was nearing its end, and the bloated monster drew closer, its flesh almost brushing against his skin.

If Franca did not emerge soon, he would resort to using Mr. K's finger!

Just then, Franca reached the shore, holding the mirror, and leapt up amidst the splashing water.

Avoiding eye contact with the monster, she lowered her head and hurried to Lumian's side, gripping his wrist.

Simultaneously, both of them turned ethereal, while the ancient mirror clattered to the ground.

A scene unfolded upon the mirror's surface: Franca grasping Lumian's hand and leading him through a short, dark tunnel to an illuminated "cave" before leaping out.

Amidst flickering lights and shadows, Lumian realized he stood upon a dim path, with distant light seeping in.

Franca retrieved the mirror that had served as his substitute and noticed countless cracks marring its surface, on the verge of shattering.

"That was a close call." She sighed sincerely.

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Chapter 190 - 190 Unexpected Development

190 Unexpected Development

Lumian glanced at the shattered mirror in Franca's hand, relief and confusion evident on his face.

"But I don't feel like I was being attacked."

His Summoning Dance still had five to six seconds left before Franca grabbed his wrist.

Franca cleared her throat and assumed the stance of a teacher.

"Some mysticism techniques are undetectable. The moment you feel attacked is the moment of your death."

Could it be that the monster secretly influenced me when I paused the Summoning Dance to enter the mirror for those brief seconds? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, the bleeding in that space caught us by surprise. We had no idea how to prevent it."

As he spoke, he looked at Franca's face and noticed her smooth skin, devoid of any scars. It was impossible to tell that blood had seeped out from multiple places.

Franca touched her face and pondered before saying, "It's indeed very bizarre. But we did lose some blood. As a Witch, I have a mystical perception of the amount of my blood. In other words, the damage we suffered in the special mirror world isn't fake. It's just that we didn't leave any wounds. Damn it, I didn't bring the carbide lamp!"

As she spoke, she turned around and searched through a pile of gravel on the side of the dim tunnel.

Lumian didn't have time to retrieve his carbide lamp either. He could only observe Franca's every move with the help of the distant light.

In less than ten seconds, Franca pulled out a mirror from the rubble.

The mirror appeared to be made of pure silver. The patterns on both sides were mysterious and sinister, and its surface was dark and lifeless, as if time had eroded it.

“As expected, there’s a corresponding mirror in reality.” Franca did her best to avoid being reflected in the silver mirror with its classic design. She also instructed Lumian, “In unsafe places or when encountering strange occurrences, try not to look into the mirror if you can. Otherwise, something terrifying might happen. We mustn’t touch such mysterious and evil objects of unknown origin!”

Lumian, who hadn’t mentioned to Franca that he couldn’t look in the mirror after using the Mystery Prying Glasses to disguise himself, nodded.

“I understand that the exit is a mirror. What I can’t figure out is how we entered that space without noticing. We didn’t come across anything along the way.”

“That baffles me too.” Franca covered the surface of the classic-styled silver mirror with a handkerchief and other items. She stood up and said, “This thing seems to be closely related to the Demoness pathway. How about you give it to me? I’ll find something valuable to compensate you later.”

“No problem,” Lumian chuckled. “You don’t have to ask. I can’t beat you.”

Franca clicked her tongue and said, “No, the spoils of war must be distributed fairly. Otherwise, there will surely be conflicts within the team. I used to be taken advantage of like this in the past. If it weren’t for my good nature and not holding grudges, I would have sought revenge long ago.”

Why does it sound like you’re cussing me, Madame… Lumian silently muttered.

If someone took his spoils and exploited him for no reason, and his strength was inferior to the other party, although he wouldn’t say anything on the spot, he would definitely find a way to seek revenge later. He wouldn’t simply “forgive” the other party so easily.

Stowing away the classic-styled silver mirror, Franca gestured toward the source of light.

“Let’s go and have a look over there. We might come across the quarry police or other smugglers. We can ask for directions.

That’s right… Lumian agreed wholeheartedly.

If it weren’t for that, the Montsouris ghost would have been eradicated long ago by the official Beyonders.

The two of them proceeded through the tunnel, guided by the faint glow, staying alert for any potential attacks.

Before long, they reached a quarry cave. In the center of the cave stood a figure wearing a felt hat. The light emanated from the carbide lamp he held in his hand.

“Uh…” Franca recognized him and called out, “Fernandez!”

She realized that the figure was Fernandez, the smuggler who had been leading the way for them.

This appeared to be the quarry cave where they had arranged to meet him.

Fernandez turned around, surprised, and asked, “How did you come from there? I’ve been waiting for nearly half an hour, but you didn’t show up. I even went to the spot where the footprints vanished to search for you, but you were nowhere to be found.”

Lumian and Franca exchanged glances and nodded.

Indeed, they had spent nearly half an hour in the special mirror world.

Franca approached Fernandez and casually explained, “We stumbled upon some clues and pursued them. However, we ended up circling back here and encountered an ambush on the way. We lost our carbide lamps.”

“What clues?” Fernandez asked, pleasantly surprised.

Franca smiled.

“We’ll discuss it with Christo directly.”

Fernandez knew his place well and didn’t pry any further. He led the two of them back along the same path they had taken before.

They ascended the secondary well and entered the underground section corresponding to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, finally arriving at the exit on Rue Anarchie.

Only when Lumian and Franca laid eyes on street peddlers, children picking up fruit peels, homeless people huddling in corners, and the bustling crowd, did they truly feel as though they had escaped from that strange realm and returned to the real world.

After boarding the carriage that “Rat” Christo had sent for them, Lumian glanced at Franca and asked in a low voice,

“What should we say later?”

Fernandez knew the carriage driver and had taken a seat beside him, so he wasn’t in the carriage.

Franca chuckled.

“We’ll simply say that we entered an unknown space, discovered some traces, and managed to escape using my mirror magic.

“The rest has nothing to do with Christo.”

Lumian didn't say another word. He closed his eyes and recalled his encounters in the special mirror world.

The four-wheeled carriage swiftly turned onto Avenue du Marché, hurtling toward Suhit's steam locomotive. It veered into the alley that led to the depot.

"Rat" Christo awaited them in the nearby warehouse.

Before long, Lumian and Franca caught sight of the rat-like smuggler.

Christo approached them with a grin and exclaimed, "Thank you, by Steam! Erkin and the others are back!"

Erkin… Franca's eyes narrowed as she blurted out, "The missing caravan has returned?"

Erkin, Christo's younger brother responsible for the smuggling caravan, had vanished previously, and Franca still had his divination handkerchief.

And now he's back?

What the f*ck was going on?

Christo nodded, still smiling.

"Indeed, the goods have returned as well!

"They arrived over an hour ago."

Over an hour ago? Wasn't that the same time when we discovered the spot where the footprints vanished and entered that peculiar mirror world? Lumian frowned, a hint of confusion stirring within him.

It was only because he had already experienced unbelievable phenomena like the time loop and the vivid dream that Lumian managed to keep his composure, unlike Franca.

Observing the surprised and perplexed expressions of Franca and Ciel, Christo smiled and stated, "I'll let Erkin explain it himself."

He turned and headed a few steps toward the entrance of the warehouse, calling out, "Erkin, come out for a moment!"

Seizing the opportunity, Franca tilted her head slightly and whispered to Lumian, "This is highly unusual…"

Lumian's lips curled into a smile as he lowered his voice and replied, "I even suspect that Rat and the others conspired to set a trap for us. They used the disappearance of the goods as bait to lure us underground into that perilous realm."

Franca studied him, amusement in her eyes, and remarked, “You don’t have much trust in others, do you?”

Lumian spoke candidly, “The dancers’ salaries make Giant and Baron Brignais resentful, and I possess the coveted Salle de Bal Brise. Only ‘Rat’ has no conflict of interest with us, so he was made to intervene.”

Franca fell into deep thought, seriously considering the possibility of being deceived.

In that moment, Lumian grinned.

“This is merely a conjecture. It doesn’t account for the footprints and other traces in the mirror world.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a man who appeared to be under 30 years old emerged from the warehouse.

He was not particularly tall, standing at about 1.6 meters. Apart from the absence of rat-like whiskers, he bore a striking resemblance to Christo.

“It is indeed Erkin,” Franca whispered to Lumian.

Then, she turned her gaze to Christo and Erkin, who were approaching together, and inquired, “Erkin, what happened?”

Erkin’s dark-blue eyes revealed a blend of fear and joy.

“We entered a peculiar world within a section of the tunnel and couldn’t find a way out. In the afternoon, while we were searching in all directions, we suddenly found ourselves back on our original path.”

Did our entry provide them an opportunity to escape? Franca had a suspicion.

Lumian stared at Erkin, his expression devoid of any emotion, as if assessing an adversary who might bring him calamity.

In his mind, he recalled the droplets of blood left behind on the ground of the mirror world. Gradually, they coalesced, staining a whole area crimson.

Could someone who had lost so much blood truly return alive?

Franca had evidently pondered this as well. She regarded Erkin and asked, “What happened to you there?”

Erkin couldn’t help but tremble.

“We started bleeding inexplicably. Towards the end, many were on the verge of death.

“By Steam, we managed to find the exit in time. As soon as we emerged, we recovered.”

Is that so? Franca felt that Erkin, adorned with the Sacred Emblem, was relaying his account in line with her own experience and could be explained. Thus, she could only temporarily set aside her doubts.

Beside them, “Rat” Christo cast a glance their way and invited them with a smile,

“Regardless of the circumstances, I must express my gratitude. Would you like to sample the most authentic Savoie roast chicken?”

“Alright,” Lumian responded on Franca’s behalf.

Christo produced a set of keys and tossed them to his brother, Erkin.

“Go to my office and bring all the spices to the kitchen.”

“Alright.” Erkin received the key and ascended the iron stairs embedded in the outer wall of the warehouse. With his left hand, he inserted one of the keys into the door of Christo’s office and turned it to unlock it.

Franca was momentarily taken aback before muttering to herself, “I recall that Erkin habitually uses his right hand…”

Why would he awkwardly open the door with his left hand when he wasn’t holding anything?

Hearing Franca’s remark, Christo nodded and replied, “Indeed, he is right-handed.”

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Chapter 191 - 191 Suspicions

191 Suspicions

Right hand… Franca's body jolted with a sudden shudder.

As a Witch, she was well-acquainted with the intricacies of mirrors, attuned to their peculiarities. And one thing she knew for certain was this: when a person gazed into a mirror, their reflection would be inverted from left to right.

The situation at hand was baffling. After Erkin, who habitually favored his right hand, had ventured into the enigmatic mirror world and returned, he had inexplicably switched to using his left hand. Franca and Lumian, however, had not experienced such a change.

What could this mean? Franca trembled with unease.

Just then, Christo reappeared at the warehouse's bottom floor, bellowing instructions to Erkin on the upper level. He demanded that Erkin retrieve his prized White Elixir wine. Seizing the opportunity, Lumian leaned in close to Franca and whispered into her ear,

"Have you noticed any connections?"

"You've thought of it too?" Franca replied, taken aback.

It was a challenge to detect Erkin's abnormality and grasp the underlying possibilities without extensive knowledge of mysticism and encounters with the Beyonder world.

Lumian continued in a hushed tone, "Judging by the amount of blood present in that space, I find it hard to believe that a regular person could have survived. From the start, I suspected something was amiss with Erkin and the other members of the caravan.

"Furthermore, you mentioned that the peculiar mirror world contains your past self—the reflection of who you once were.

"A mirrored image is left-right reversed in reality.

"Do you think the Erkin in the mirror has replaced the original Erkin?"

Franca fell into silence, pondering the implications.

“I dread to consider such a horrifying possibility, but the circumstances align more and more with your theory.

“I need to be certain.”

As they conversed, Erkin descended from the warehouse’s upper level, clutching a sack filled with various spices and two bottles of White Elixir wine. He made his way towards a nearby grayish-white, two-story building.

The structure served as a dining room and kitchen for “Rat” Christo’s subordinates.

On the surface, Christo presented himself as a merchant. He owned multiple companies specializing in trade and providing storage facilities.

Franca approached Christo with a solemn expression and asked, “Are you absolutely sure that is truly Erkin?”

Christo blurted out in surprise, “Why are you asking such a peculiar question? Of course, it’s Erkin. By Steam, how could I not recognize my own brother?

“My kids are also quite fond of him. They find nothing unfamiliar about him.”

Franca pondered for a moment before smiling faintly.

“I can’t help but feel that something might go awry after venturing into that bizarre realm.”

Franca chuckled.

“You’re not a Beyonder yet. Before you took over this smuggling business, didn’t you anticipate that those above you would follow certain customs and pay extra for particular matters?”

Christo fell silent, uncertain of how to respond.

Franca then said, “I’ll help you confirm whether anything is amiss with those individuals.”

Franca retrieved her makeup box and Erkin’s handkerchief, preparing to perform a divination in front of “Rat” Christo.

“Erkin’s whereabouts. Erkin’s whereabouts…”

As Franca chanted in Hermes, her eyes darkened, and she gently caressed the surface of the makeup mirror.

Lumian observed as the mirror shimmered with watery ripples of light.

Soon, a scene materialized within its depths: Erkin, dressed in a blue shirt, stood near the kitchen, engaged in conversation with the chef.

“I knew everything would go smoothly.” “Rat” Christo chuckled.

He then gestured towards the warehouse.

“I have some matters to attend to. You can explore the area on your own or wait for me in the dining room.”

Once the short-statured leader of the smugglers had entered the warehouse, Lumian turned to Franca.

“It appears that the real Erkin might be dead.”

Thus, the divination results indicated the person who originally belonged to the mirror world.

“Do you still think something is amiss with Erkin and the others?” Franca furrowed her brow.

“And if not?” Lumian laughed. “Should we cover our eyes and ears and pretend we didn’t see, hear, or discover anything?”

Franca pondered for a moment before responding, “Perhaps, because I’m using mirror divination, it will be easier to pinpoint the individual within the mirror. I shall attempt another method.”

Surveying the warehouse area, she picked up a short wooden stick and held it before her, pressing down from the top.

After uttering a similar divination statement, the wooden stick snapped, pointing directly at the grayish-white, two-story building that housed the kitchen and dining room.

Erkin was there.

Franca fell silent momentarily before declaring, “Let me see if that mirror can be of any assistance.”

She referred to the classic-styled silver mirror that served as a gateway to the peculiar realm, hoping to employ it in banishing all the monsters that had emerged from within.

Lumian eagerly trailed behind Franca as they entered the dining room.

Their eyes were immediately drawn to a woman wearing a grayish-green dress. She appeared to be in her late twenties, holding the hands of a boy and a girl. Tears of joy streamed down her face as she embraced Erkin, who had just emerged from the kitchen.

“You’re finally back!”

“Pépé!”

“Pépé, play with me!”

Amidst the clamor of excited voices, Erkin’s face radiated sheer happiness. His brows and eyes reflected pure joy.

“…” Franca paused in her steps, silently observing the heartwarming family reunion for a long while.

Eventually, she let out a sigh and remarked, “Let’s give it a little more time.”

Lumian maintained his smile.

“Are you finding it hard to bear?”

Franca sighed.

“The real Erkin might already be dead. After all, this is his reflection.

“If I were to expose his true nature now, kill him, or force him back into the mirror, not only would his wife and children fail to show gratitude, but they would also despise me.”

“You’re right.” Lumian chuckled. “In any case, if anything untoward happens in the future, whether someone lives or dies is not our concern. We simply need to exercise caution. Why should we appear as the ‘villains’? No one will thank you for it. Yes, let’s avoid ‘Rat’ Christo and the others for the time being. If we don’t encounter them, it’s as if nothing has occurred.”

Franca’s inner conflict grew.

She didn’t know what the mirror’s reflection would do after replacing the person in reality.

What if his kindness morphed into cruelty, and his affection transformed into hatred?

Franca, unable to reach a decision, could only gaze at Lumian and sigh. “Your words are rather cold-hearted…”

She began to think that Jenna’s assessment of Ciel held some truth.

“Madame, am I not merely following your inclinations to help you convince yourself?” Lumian responded, a mix of annoyance and amusement evident in his tone.

Franca offered a sheepish smile.

“How do you propose we handle this situation?”

Lumian glanced at Erkin, who was recounting his strange encounter to his wife and children as if it were someone else’s story.

“We should have someone write a letter and report this matter to the police headquarters or a cathedral.

“The letter should merely state that ‘Rat’ Christo’s brother, Erkin, ventured into an underground realm with a group of individuals and remained absent for the majority of the day. Upon resurfacing, their dominant hand had changed.

“Official Beyonders have encountered numerous anomalies, so they should be familiar with the underground. They will likely deduce what has befallen Erkin and his companions.

“As for how they handle it, that’s their responsibility. We need not worry. If they refrain from harming Erkin and the others, the mirror person poses no threat. They can serve as replacements for the deceased originals. And if those monsters are eliminated, we won’t have to confront pain and animosity, let alone compensate anyone.

“In short, we must trust the officials and the Church.

“Emperor Roselle once mentioned that a gentleman wouldn’t feel inclined to dine on an animal they were familiar with after it had been slaughtered. However, if they remained unaware, it wouldn’t be an issue. They could enjoy their meal blissfully. The same principle applies in this case.”

Lumian couldn’t recall the exact words, so he did his best to convey the sentiment in his own words.

Franca pondered deeply for a few moments before being convinced.

“You’re right…”

She glanced at Lumian.

“You don’t sound like a mob leader at all.”

“A true mob leader knows how to manipulate the authorities.” Lumian grinned.

Franca chuckled and remarked, “Do I have to address you as ‘Godfather’ from now on?”

Without giving Lumian a chance to inquire further, she swiftly added, “A mob’s godfather. Yes, for now, you don’t have the means. I’ll take responsibility for leaking the information to the officials.”

Mob's godfather… Lumian had heard his sister mention this as the subject of her next book. He grasped the general idea, but couldn't help feeling a tad disheartened.

In the ensuing hours, he and Franca joyously attended a banquet hosted by "Rat" Christo, engaging in lively conversations with Erkin and the other smugglers.

Lumian couldn't stop raving about the delectable Savoie roasted chicken. It was seasoned with an array of spices, its surface glistening with a similar concoction. The golden skin boasted juiciness, tenderness, and an aromatic essence.

He sliced a piece of the crispy skin-covered meat and let it soak in the succulent juices for a moment before savoring it. The experience was pure bliss, rendering it impossible for him to cease indulging.

As the banquet drew to a close, Franca noticed only a handful of people remained at the dining table. She turned to "Rat" Christo, a smile playing on her lips.

"Come closer. I have something to ask you."

Christo, momentarily taken aback, shifted his chair nearer to Franca and responded with a smile, "And what's the matter?"

Franca smiled and whispered, "In truth, Ciel and I also ventured into that peculiar world. Fortunately, we managed to escape…"

With that, she swiftly produced the roast chicken's knife and drove it into the table in front of "Rat" Christo. Her voice turned icy as she interrogated him, "What's concealed within that shipment? You nearly got us killed!"

"I-I don't know!" Christo glanced around, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead.

Realizing that only he, Franca, and Cield remained at the table, he hastily explained, "I genuinely don't know. The boss instructed me to bring it to Trier!"

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Chapter 192 - 192 Verification

192 Verification

Boss? Lumian was alarmed. He hadn't anticipated the connection to Gardner Martin, but now things were starting to make sense.

Why did the smuggling caravan vanish on a known route that had been used before?

And why was "Rat" Christo so eager to seek their help? If he had only lost a shipment, he would have made more confirmations. It would have taken time for him to reveal his vulnerabilities and mistakes to his peers, who might be eyeing his position.

Lumian's mind raced with thoughts.

Gardner Martin might be a Sequence 6 or 5 on the Hunter pathway.

Both Franca and I entered the special mirror world, and we're a Hunter and a Demoness, respectively, on similar and neighboring paths.

Mr. K instructed me to approach Gardner Martin and gain his trust.

Franca, as a member of the secret organization Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, has quite a high Sequence. It's surprising that she's willing to be the mistress of a mob boss like Gardner Martin.

The boss of the Savoie Mob must be hiding a major secret or involved in something significant…

Why does he want Christo to smuggle an item related to the Hunter or Demoness pathway into Trier? And why go through the risks of underground smuggling? Is he afraid of the tax collectors? Instead, why doesn't the boss retrieve the item himself outside the city and have Christo get a smuggler lead the way? It would be safer and more discreet. Could it be that he knows the item might cause trouble and wants to avoid the risk? Lumian shifted his gaze from "Rat" Christo to Franca's face.

To Lumian's surprise, the Witch seemed unprepared for such an answer. Her initial shock was swiftly followed by a hint of excitement and joy.

She stared intently at "Rat" Christo and sneered, "Are you trying to f*cking deceive me? How come I haven't heard about Gardner asking you to bring something into Trier? Where is that thing?"

Excitement… Joy… Lumian grew increasingly certain that Franca had ulterior motives for joining the Savoie Mob and approaching Gardner Martin.

Christo forced a smile and responded, “It’s in an iron box. I’ve already sent it to Rue des Fontaines. Perhaps the boss hasn’t informed you yet.”

As a seasoned member of the Savoie Mob, he knew the power Franca possessed. She could easily dispatch him, especially since he wasn’t prepared and hadn’t brought any assistance. Moreover, she excelled in divination and could detect falsehoods.

“You better not be lying to me!” Franca recoiled, produced her makeup mirror, and began performing a divination in front of “Rat” Christo.

Lumian cooperatively stood up and walked to Christo’s side. He reached out and firmly grasped Christo’s shoulder.

Once Franca confirmed the truth through her divination, Lumian patted the “Rat” on the back with a smile.

“If anything similar happens in the future, make sure to remind me of any potential issues with the merchandise. I must be prepared for any unexpected incidents.

“Otherwise, I might just chop you into pieces and feed you to your beloved kids.”

He had heard from Louis that “Rat” Christo had numerous pets and had a special fondness for dogs.

Fueled by the threat, Christo grew angry.

Franca may be the boss’s mistress, and she’s stronger than me. I can tolerate her treatment, but what right does a newbie like you have?

“The boss asked me to keep it a secret this time.”

Franca stowed away her makeup box and cursed, “You son of a bitch! You could have at least given us a clue!”

Christo sheepishly smiled and replied, “Alright, alright.”

Surprisingly, he wasn’t at all offended by the insults. To him, dogs were cherished family members, so how could their mention be taken as an offense?

He often warned his lecherous subordinates that laying a hand on his wife was akin to touching his dog!

Observing Franca and Ciel’s softened attitudes, Christo curiously asked, “Is that strange world really as Erkin described?”

Before Franca could respond, Lumian patted Christo's shoulder with a smile.

"Haven't you figured it out yet? Has a dog eaten your brain? We were just bluffing you!

"We didn't enter any strange world at all. We simply suspected something was amiss with your goods, considering the previous smooth smuggling operations and the sudden involvement of a Beyonder incident. So, we decided to deceive you!"

"…" "Rat" Christo couldn't help but feel vexed.

Indeed, if Franca and Ciel had truly entered a strange world, they wouldn't have returned so swiftly!

Erkin and the others had been missing for hours!

How could he have been so foolish?

Why did he fall for their ruse?

Suppressing his emotions, Christo looked at Franca with a fawning smile.

"Please don't tell the boss that I revealed the existence of that item. He will not be pleased with me."

Franca cast a strange glance at Lumian and said to "Rat" Christo, "Fine. From now on, you owe me a favor."

"Alright!" Christo hastily agreed.

After bidding farewell to the leader of the smuggling operation, Lumian and Franca exited the warehouse and turned onto the narrow street of Avenue du Marché.

"I realized today that Christo is a complete fool. He's incredibly gullible," Franca remarked, breaking the silence as she glanced at Lumian beside her. There was a hint of a smile on her face, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You're quite skilled at deceiving others."

Lumian assumed a composed demeanor.

"In Cordu, you must have heard about Cordu, right? They call me the Prankster King."

Franca, familiar with Cordu due to the wanted poster, smiled at Lumian and responded,

"Did you lie to me earlier then? Heh heh, Jenna's assessment of you wasn't entirely off. You possess cunning and trickery."

“You’re my sister’s companion. I’ve been telling you the truth,” Lumian said sincerely, maintaining an honest expression.

However, he didn’t divulge the complete truth. Even if Franca were to confirm it through divination, she wouldn’t detect any signs of deception.

Franca observed his expression and nodded in satisfaction.

“I am willing to trust Muggle’s brother. Hmm… Let’s pretend you don’t know about Gardner’s item. There are certain things that can be harmful if you were to uncover the truth. I won’t inquire about it either.”

“Alright,” Lumian acquiesced, obediently playing the role he had assumed in front of Aurore.

The two then went their separate ways on Avenue du Marché. One headed towards Salle de Bal Brise, while the other turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches.

It was already past 8 p.m., and the sky had darkened. Gas wall lamps embedded in the walls illuminated the dance hall, casting a yellowish glow on the entire first floor. As they approached the dance floor, the ambiance grew dimmer.

Amidst greetings, Lumian took a seat at the bar counter and ordered a glass of fennel and mint absinthe, known as Parrot.

The drink was rather invigorating, and with just one sip, it cleared his mind as if he had been slapped awake.

Lumian sat for a while, enjoying Jenna’s risqué songs. Eventually, he noticed Charlie approaching the bar counter with a tray in hand.

“Ciel… Boss!” Charlie swiftly altered the way he addressed Lumian upon realizing it was the bartender looking at him.

Lumian took a sip of the psychedelic green liquid and asked with a smile,

“Do you prefer the dance hall or the underground bar in the motel?”

Charlie glanced at the bartender and the other waiters before lowering his voice.

“I still prefer the motel bar. Over there, I’m the center of attention!”

I can tell… Lumian chuckled and nodded towards the young female singer who had taken over from Jenna.

“Is she your friend’s daughter?”

Charlie had previously mentioned a friend who had fallen victim to a loan shark. Pressured by Baron Brignais, the friend tragically committed suicide by jumping off a building, and now his daughter was forced to sing at Salle de Bal Brise.

“Yes,” Charlie replied with a sorrowful expression.

The female singer, dressed glamorously in a revealing blouse and skirt, was around Jenna’s age but lacked the same allure.

Upon closer observation, Lumian noticed the key distinction between the two:

Jenna’s eyes radiated a certain spark, whereas despite her fake smile, the light in the other singer’s eyes was absent.

Charlie opened his mouth, seemingly hesitant to ask for something, but in the end, he decided against it and remained silent.

Lumian took another sip of the Parrot and immersed himself in deep thought, the song playing in the background.

Approaching 10:30 p.m., he stood up and made his way back upstairs. He changed into a worn linen shirt, an old jacket, brown pants, and topped it off with a dark blue cap.

With this appearance, he resembled a vagabond.

Without hesitation, Lumian pushed open the window and leaped into the alley behind the dance hall.

His intention was to pay a visit to Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

His Prophecy Spell had revealed that Monsieur Ive, the landlord of Auberge du Coq Doré, would be present at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons between 11 p.m. and 12 p.m. this Friday, i.e., tonight.

Lumian wasn’t expecting to confront the matter involving the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire, single-handedly. He had no intention of facing them head-on. Instead, he aimed to gather valuable information and uncover more problems through observation.

To him, the most crucial objective was to utilize Monsieur Ive and the others to locate the place where Susanna Mattise had resided during her lifetime and obtain an item she had carried for a significant period. This would lay the groundwork for the Exorcism Spell when she eventually launched an attack.

Although completing the ritualistic magic in time might prove challenging, being prepared was preferable to being caught off guard.

After taking a few detours, Lumian arrived outside Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Since it was not yet 11 p.m., he saw no need to rush inside. Instead, he found a corner and settled down, observing Monsieur Ive’s beige six-story apartment with the demeanor of a genuine tramp.

Before long, Lumian spotted the landlord.

Monsieur Ive returned from Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, holding a black cane. He wore a faded dark suit, chestnut pants, and an aged half top hat.

A few minutes later, a dim light emanated from one of the windows of his apartment.

Lumian patiently waited.

As he waited, his brow gradually furrowed.

Why hasn't Monsieur Ive made his way to Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? It's already past 11 p.m.

The window continued to emit a yellowish glow, and occasional figures passed by.

Fifteen minutes elapsed, yet Monsieur Ive had not left his apartment, crossed Avenue du Marché, and entered Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

Lumian couldn't help but mutter to himself, Could there be an error in my Prophecy Spell?

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Chapter 193 - 193 Luck Enhancement

193 Luck Enhancement

Lumian waited patiently until midnight drew near. As the clock struck 11:30 p.m., the light in Ive's room went out, yet no one emerged from the apartment. It seemed the miser had decided to save on gas bills and retired for the night. The final act of the play at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons concluded as midnight approached. The audience trickled out one by one, but no one entered the theater.

Lumian muttered to himself, his thoughts racing: Could it be that the Prophecy Spell's answer isn't precise enough? After all, the ritualistic magic was cast by me. It's understandable that its effect isn't perfect. Yes, that's a possibility. But what if the Prophecy Spell is accurate?

Alarmed amidst his thoughts, Lumian's head snapped in the direction of the door adorned with theater posters.

If the Prophecy Spell was correct, it meant that Monsieur Ive had indeed been at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons between 11 p.m. and midnight.

And if Monsieur Ive truly had been there, who was the identical figure who had entered the apartment and never left?

There was a strong chance it was a decoy!

A decoy!

No way… Lumian couldn't fathom his own suspicion.

How could he be deceived by such a trick, especially after meeting and conversing with Monsieur Ive before?

He was more inclined to believe that the Prophecy Spell was flawed.

Perhaps there's a tunnel beneath the apartment leading to Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? Lumian pondered, searching for a plausible explanation.

Trier was a city where establishing a tunnel was easier than in other places. It only required a short excavation to connect to underground passageways and sewers. However, such tunnels were also prone to discovery. The Underground Trier teemed with people—quarry police patrolled the area, smugglers traveled through, and planters passed by. Unless the tunnel went deeper or had a cleverly hidden entrance, it wouldn't take long for it to be found.

If Monsieur Ive's apartment did have a similar tunnel, he wouldn't have needed to venture out to the nearby Underground Trier entrance at night.

In the midst of these thoughts, Lumian recalled two important details.

Firstly, he had "witnessed" a change in Monsieur Ive's luck when they first met. The next day, he realized that luck had inexplicably altered.

Secondly, Monsieur Ive possessed Beyonder powers and had a high likelihood of being a believer in the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire. Despite having a low Sequence, when the official Beyonders brought him in for questioning, they found nothing amiss.

Combining these perplexing facts with the disparity between the Prophecy Spell and reality, Lumian's pupils contracted as he muttered to himself:

A decoy, could it be real?

Was the person residing in the opposite apartment all this time after the robbery a mere decoy?

Is that why his luck changed and the official Beyonders failed to detect anything wrong?

How is it possible for him to resemble Monsieur Ive so perfectly? Did he employ a mystical item akin to the Mystery Prying Glasses or some other method? And where is the real Monsieur Ive hiding in Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons? The more Lumian pondered, the more unnerved he became.

No one had discovered the substitution that took place.

At the very least, Christo's men showed signs of mirror-like reversal.

From the assortment of the pervert's abilities, Lumian had already deduced that Monsieur Ive had sensed something awry after being "robbed." After all, even a single verl d'or held value as money. No robber would willingly discard it. And if it had truly been discarded, it meant that the robbery was not the true objective. It was understandable, then, that Monsieur Ive had prepared himself to conceal his secrets from the official Beyonders. Lumian simply hadn't anticipated such a bizarre method.

He had actually fashioned a doppelg?nger identical to Monsieur Ive!

For a moment, Lumian couldn't ascertain whether the decoy in the apartment was an ordinary person adorned with Beyonder cosmetics or a devotee of the evil god with extraordinary powers.

If it was the former, Lumian desired to seize the opportunity in the dead of night, apprehend the decoy, administer a thorough thrashing, and extract the truth. Then, he would deliver the decoy to the police headquarters or a cathedral, leaving the

official Beyonders to conclude matters.

If it was the latter, he dared not act impulsively. No one knew the decoy's Sequence level or the breadth of its abilities.

Lumian turned his head once more, casting a glance at the brick-red, three-story building housing Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. He noted that no more patrons emerged from its entrance, dispelling his idea of venturing inside for another look.

The final performance of the day had concluded!

After contemplating for a while, Lumian resolved to make some preparations.

He rose slowly to his feet and proceeded toward Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman, skulking in the shadows untouched by the glow of the gas street lamps.

Along the way, he scrutinized the vagabonds slumbering in the corners of the roadside, his gaze deep and earnest.

Finally, he found a suitable target.

Huddled beneath a makeshift barricade in the alley, the vagabond's clothing was tattered and stained with mud. His legs bore the marks of dog bites, festering wounds oozing yellow pus.

In Lumian's eyes, this individual was plagued by misfortune. He would face a series of calamities in the next two or three days, with his very life potentially at stake.

This made him the ideal "material" for the Luck Enhancement Spell!

Yes, Lumian intended to employ the ritualistic magic of the Alms Monk—the Luck Enhancement Spell—to fashion an item capable of transmitting ill fortune.

If the fake Monsieur Ive were to be plagued by misfortune, continually beset by various predicaments, there was a high likelihood that he would reveal his predicament to the official Beyonders!

With this in mind, Lumian had been on the lookout for the most hapless vagabonds. This particular group belonged to the realm of ill-fated individuals.

With his cap pulled low, Lumian approached the vagabond, positioning himself so the gas lamps on the street cast his face in shadows.

He crouched down, black-gloved hands ready, and gently prodded the tramp.

"You…" The tramp stirred, his voice filled with pain and confusion.

“I need your assistance with something. Willing to lend a hand?” Lumian produced a silver coin, worth one verl d’or, adorned with cherubs and intricate lines.

The tramp’s eyes were immediately drawn to the gleaming coin. Without hesitation, he nodded and replied, “No problem!”

As he spoke, he extended his hand, already imagining the aroma of Apple Whiskey Sour and hearty meatloaf.

Once the silver coin was in his palm, the tramp’s eyes widened suddenly, fixated on something behind Lumian. He blurted out in shock, “That’s…”

Seizing the moment Lumian turned his head, the tramp swiftly pushed himself up, attempting to vault over the barricade and sprint down the alley.

It was evident that giving money to a vagabond and enlisting his cooperation in something posed a clear danger!

For an ordinary tramp, the logical choice was to accept the money and make a run for it!

Whack!

Lumian swiftly withdrew his right hand, calmly observing as the tramp slumped against the barricade, unconscious.

From the start, Lumian had no intention of allowing the tramp to witness everything while awake. Even if he were blindfolded and his ears blocked, there was still a risk of danger. Moreover, there was the potential for revealing Lumian’s identity and the sinister ritualistic magic known as the Luck Enhancement Spell.

Hence, his plan had been to seek the tramp’s consent and then render him unconscious.

Lumian assisted the tramp to his feet, as if supporting a drunken companion, and guided him to the nearest entrance to Underground Trier. Finding a concealed spot nearby, he secured the tramp, binding his hands and feet, blindfolding him, and muffling his ears.

Once everything was in place, he stealthily returned to Salle de Bal Brise, retrieving a carbide lamp and the necessary tools.

Without delay, he went back to the entrance, carefully lifting the unconscious tramp and making his way to the quarry cave where he had previously performed the Prophecy Spell.

This time, however, the ritual had undergone a change. While it remained a dualistic ceremony, the orange candle representing a deity and other supplicants had been replaced with one of a grayish-white hue.

It still contained Lumian's blood.

To enhance his chances of success, Lumian intended to utilize the ritualistic magic to "pray" to the corruption sealed within his chest, mobilizing a fragment of its power.

After constructing the altar and erecting a wall of spirituality, he plunged Hedsey's tainted dagger into the tramp, allowing his blood to flow into a metal vial.

The tramp stirred, only to be swiftly rendered unconscious once again.

Lumian disinfected and bandaged the wound, blending the blood with ash from his own hair to create an ink-like substance. Using the thinnest paintbrush at his disposal, he meticulously outlined a series of intricate and enigmatic symbols on faux goatskin parchment.

The design consisted of interwoven black thorns forming a ring, snakes with entwined heads and tails, a river composed of these serpentine figures, distorted lines, a peculiar eye, and more.

By the time he completed a fraction of the intricate work, Lumian's forehead was drenched in a sheen of cold sweat.

He positioned the tramp and the faux goatskin adorned with symbols upon the boulder that served as the altar. Dripping perfume into the flames and sprinkling powder, Lumian took two steps back, fixing his gaze upon the gently flickering yellow candle flame, and uttered ancient Hermes words:

"Power of Inevitability!

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

As before, the flame of the deity's candle compressed to its utmost limits before expanding, swelling to the size of a clenched fist. Its hue transformed to a silvery-black shade, distorting everything in its vicinity. Gray mist filled the air, and a tempest of darkness whirled about.

Lumian, his ears assailed by frenzied murmurs, endured the vertigo and switched to the Hermes tongue.

"I implore you,

"I implore you to alter this destitute man's fate.

"I pray that you will take away his misfortune."

At this juncture, Lumian took a step forward and ignited the faux goatskin adorned with mysterious symbols using the silver-black candle flame. Placing it within a

natural crevice on the altar's surface, he observed as the parchment began to smolder.

In the next instant, he produced a gold coin worth five verl d'or, engraved with the Sunbird, and positioned it near the tramp's outstretched hand.

To those gripped by greed, money was an irresistible lure. It served as the optimal conduit!

Lumian, burdened by a sensation akin to carrying a weight of over five hundred kilograms, retreated a step, awaiting the consumption of the smoldering faux goatskin before commencing the final incantation.

"Gray amber, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation…"

The entire altar abruptly ignited, assuming an ethereal semblance. Before Lumian, an illusory, intricate, and chilling river of mercury silently coursed its way.

It enshrouded the tramp and the gold coin, amplifying the murmurs in Lumian's ears and causing the cyan veins upon his face to bulge.

Instinctively, Lumian recoiled from the agony of supplicating for a boon. Suddenly, the illusory image shrank, descending upon the surface of the gold coin resting upon the altar.

Everything returned to its former state, except for the gold coin, which now appeared dimmer under the silver-black illumination.

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Chapter 194 - 194 Triggered

194 Triggered

At the sight of this, Lumian hastily concluded the ritual and extinguished the candles in the proper sequence.

The frenzied ravings that had filled his ears vanished, and the searing pain abruptly ceased before it could overwhelm him.

Once he tidied up the altar in a rough manner, Lumian shifted his gaze to the 5 verl d'or coin.

It no longer appeared peculiar. Bathed in the glow of the carbide lamp, it shimmered with a captivating golden sheen, indistinguishable from any other coin.

Lumian's eyes darkened suddenly, as if he were observing a living being, examining its fortune.

Normally, he couldn't "see" an object's fate, but this time was different. After focusing, he realized that the gold coin was enveloped in black vapor tinged with a hint of blood-red glow.

The former symbolized ill fortune, while the latter indicated a degree of impending catastrophe.

Phew… Lumian let out a sigh of relief.

This meant that the Luck Enhancement Spell had succeeded. The tramp's streak of misfortune for the next few days had been transferred to the gold coin!

However, if Lumian didn't find another person to bear this fate within three days, it would revert to the tramp, permanently untransferable.

Lumian continued to gaze at the tramp for a few more seconds, confirming that his luck had temporarily returned to normal, neither good nor bad.

Satisfied, Lumian, already positioned at the edge of the altar, reached out and picked up the 5 verl d'or, which served as the medium for luck transference.

He wasn't concerned that this act would transfer the misfortune attached to the item onto himself. That's because activating the Luck Enhancement Spell required specific conditions:

Firstly, the recipient had to willingly accept the gold coin and subjectively desire to possess it.

Secondly, throughout the entire process, the recipient had to exploit a situation they shouldn't have.

In other words, if Lumian used the gold coin to make a purchase, the shopkeeper wouldn't suffer any ill luck merely because they accepted the item—unless they sold Lumian something counterfeit or dishonestly manipulated the transaction for illicit gain.

Likewise, if Lumian discreetly slipped the gold coin into Charlie's pocket without his immediate awareness, Charlie wouldn't encounter misfortune when he eventually used it.

As the original owner of the coin, Lumian naturally remained unaffected by the Luck Enhancement Spell when he retrieved it.

The two straightforward methods to trigger the Luck Enhancement Spell were to keep the coin in his pocket and allow the target to steal it. He could also feign leaving it behind so the target could pick it up.

Lumian believed that unless individuals like Monsieur Ive, who had acquired a miserly habit, underwent a significant transformation, they would still harbor an enduring fondness for money. Falling into such a trap would be easy for them.

After erasing various traces on the altar, he hoisted the tramp onto his back and ascended to the surface. He dumped him back into the alley where he had been found, removing the ropes binding his hands and feet, along with the cloth covering his eyes and ears.

The tramp stirred slowly, uttering pleas of desperate fear, "Please, let me go!"

He blinked his eyes open, instinctively scanning his surroundings. To his realization, there was no one in sight, and he found himself still slumbering in his usual spot.

"…" The tramp fell silent.

As his senses gradually returned, his initial reaction was to delve into his pocket.

A chill seeped into his mind, and with a gleeful expression, he retrieved a silver coin worth 1 verl d'or.

It's still here!

It's really still there!

It wasn't a dream!

Under the faint crimson moonlight casting its glow from above and the street lamps illuminating the vicinity, the tramp fiddled with the silver coin repeatedly, assuring himself that it wasn't a counterfeit.

Only then did he recall to examine his body.

Soon, he noticed that his arm was bandaged, and a sharp ache assaulted his mind.

Apart from that, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

The tramp stumbled to his feet, rubbing his backside as he muttered to himself, "It's not that kind of pervert…"

Having witnessed the world prior to his bankruptcy, he was aware that Trier housed its fair share of peculiar individuals. Consequently, various private organizations had sprung up. Some advocated that men and women existed solely for reproduction, while others believed that true love only blossomed between men. Gatherings even catered to those who believed that women alone held the secret to loving their own kind.

The tramp had initially suspected he had fallen victim to men with a peculiar fixation on foul, unwashed men. However, it seemed that wasn't the case.

After pondering for a moment, he conjectured that someone had taken an interest in his blood and extracted some. The 1 verl d'or was his reward.

He had heard tales before of influential figures relying on continual blood transfusions to sustain their lives.

"At least there's 1 verl d'or." The tramp instantly rejoiced, no longer dwelling on the loss of blood.

He even entertained the hope that the other party would seek him out once more. When the time came, he would willingly inquire about their desired price.

…

Lumian relied on a copper coin toss to decide that he would spend the night at Auberge du Coq Doré. Consequently, he returned to Room 207 and slept until 6 a.m.

After having breakfast and engaging in some outdoor exercises, then returning to the motel, changing his attire, and disguising himself, Lumian prepared to set off for Avenue du Marché to find the two cleaning ladies already hard at work.

Lumian caught sight of a cleaning lady in her fifties, sporting a vibrant golden wig and makeup, as she diligently cleared the trash in the lobby. Lumian halted his steps and asked contemplatively, "You're Elodie, aren't you?"

He recalled Charlie mentioning her name.

“Yes, Monsieur Ciel.” Elodie straightened her posture.

She wore an old yet clean grayish-white dress and stood at an average height of 1.65 meters. From her facial features, it was evident that she had been quite attractive in her youth.

“You know me?” Lumian inquired nonchalantly.

Elodie answered truthfully, “Monsieur Charlie Collent spoke of you before. He mentioned that you’re the hotel’s guardian.”

Heh heh, just as expected of Charlie… That’s the right attitude. No trace of inferiority or fear… Lumian started to feel that Elodie, the cleaning lady, wasn’t a former street girl as Charlie had speculated.

He casually asked, “I heard from Charlie that you used to be a theater actress?”

“Yes.” A smile graced Elodie’s face. “I performed in two theaters, taking on supporting roles. However, one of them went bankrupt, and the other stopped hiring me for some reason. I was already quite old by then.”

As she reminisced about the past, a hint of melancholy appeared in her demeanor.

Lumian nodded and glanced towards the motel door.

“Have you heard of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons?”

This was the question he was truly interested in.

This cleaning lady named Elodie was originally a theater actress, but she had been hired by Monsieur Ive, the motel landlord who had a close relationship with Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons. It was a little suspicious.

Elodie’s expression became animated.

“I know that their plays are splendid. The actors possess remarkable acting skills. It’s worth saving up for a month just to purchase tickets to their shows.

“When I attended a performance at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, I discovered that they were in need of a cleaning lady for half a day. That’s why I ended up here.”

I see… It seems unrelated to Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons or Monsieur Ive… Lumian refrained from further probing to avoid raising any suspicions. He smiled and remarked, “Seems like you have other jobs?”

Elodie believed that Monsieur Ciel sought to ascertain the cleaning lady’s background to protect the motel’s interests, so she responded honestly, “Every day from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., I work at a factory south of the market district. It’s called the Goodville Chemical Factory, situated on Rue Saint-Hilaire.”

Rue Saint-Hilaire ran alongside Trier's city walls and neighbored the factories in Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

Trier's factories had preserved a practice from the era of Roselle. If production continued around the clock, the workers were divided into three shifts: one for the morning to noon, another for the afternoon to evening, and the final one for the night.

"That sounds demanding." Lumian sighed.

Elodie smiled and spoke gently, "I have two children who are nearly grown. Once they secure their own jobs, I won't have to toil so relentlessly."

"What about your husband?" Lumian casually inquired.

Elodie's expression darkened.

"He died in a factory accident a few years ago."

Lumian didn't pry further. Instead, he engaged in conversation with another cleaning lady, faithfully fulfilling his duties as the protector of Auberge du Coq Doré.

Exiting Rue Anarchie, Lumian stepped onto Avenue du Marché, making his way towards Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

He wasn't intentionally waiting for Monsieur Ive, who was suspected of being a decoy. His intention was simply to observe. His primary objective was to keep a close watch on the individuals heading to 126 Avenue du Marché.

The Prophecy Spell had revealed to him that he would cross paths with Louis Lund on Avenue du Marché. "Hammer" Ait had mentioned that Louis Lund would once again seek out the boss of the Poison Spur Mob, "Black Scorpion" Roger, this Saturday or Sunday, and "Black Scorpion" Roger resided at 126 Avenue du Marché.

With this combination of information, Lumian had decided to become a "permanent resident" on Avenue du Marché on Monday and wander about in hopes of encountering his target.

As Lumian neared Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and Monsieur Ive's apartment, he slowed his pace. Sometimes, he sat among the tramps, while other times, he visited a nearby café for a drink.

Since he was already there, it was only natural for him to keep an eye out for Monsieur Ive. After all, this was Avenue du Marché as well.

After nearly 45 minutes, Lumian finally spotted the landlord of the motel.

Clad in a faded formal suit, a worn-out top hat, and a black cane that was on the verge of losing its paint, Monsieur Ive emerged from the apartment and made his way towards the Suhit steam locomotive station.

Lumian gradually stood up and glanced behind him. He feigned terror and jogged, as if he were being pursued by an enemy.

In his attempt to overtake Monsieur Ive from behind, he accidentally collided with him.

A clatter ensued as a golden coin fell to the ground, yet Lumian seemed oblivious to it. He lowered his head and fled in a panic.

Monsieur Ive grumbled, his gaze suddenly drawn to the golden coin on the pavement.

Subconsciously, he wanted to call out to the impolite individual, but as he extended his hand, no words escaped his lips.

Swiftly scanning his surroundings, he swiftly squatted down and retrieved the 5-verl d’or coin. Nonchalantly, he slipped it into his pocket, as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

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Chapter 195 - 195 Candidate

195 Candidate

Hidden behind the shadow of an ebony street lamp, a mere twenty meters away from Monsieur Ive, Lumian leaned discreetly, tugging his cap lower amidst the bustling crowd. He watched intently as his mark retrieved the glistening gold coin, secretively stashing it away.

Only then did Lumian release a sigh of relief. With one hand nonchalantly tucked inside his pocket, he strolled towards 126 Avenue du Marché, paying no further heed to the dubious decoy, for the Luck Enhancement Spell had been officially set in motion, impervious to interruption.

However, the spell required time to manifest its effects. Within half a day or, at most, a full day, misfortune would incessantly plague the false Monsieur Ive. Lumian need only orchestrate a small incident when the opportune moment arrived, and the chances were high that Monsieur Ive would inadvertently unveil his peculiar nature to the legitimate Beyonders.

As Lumian ventured forth, he soon realized that 126 Avenue du Marché was none other than the abode of “Black Scorpion” Roger, the very nerve center of the Poison Spur Mob. Consequently, he dared not approach too closely, wary of exposing himself. Settling himself near a café window, diagonally positioned at a distance of over ten meters, he ordered a Fermo coffee and a dariole.

While awaiting his refreshments, Lumian attentively scanned the passersby on Avenue du Marché, his gaze lingering upon the promotional posters adorning the café’s walls.

A prevalent theme among them was the impending National Convention elections scheduled to commence on Sunday.

There were three contenders vying for the position: Matthew Boulanger, representing the National Party; Hugues Artois, championing the Enlightenment Party; and Jacques Sanson, hailing from the Revolutionary Party.

As Lumian observed the fervor surrounding the approach to 126 Avenue du Marché, he found himself engrossed in the manifestos of the candidates.

Matthew Boulanger, the incumbent parliament member for the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, advocated for the restoration of Intis’s former glory. His rallying cry was “Make Intis Glorious Again.” Boulanger attributed the nation’s current predicaments to its defeat in the recent war against the Loen Kingdom. His proposed solution entailed reorganizing the Intis army with a

renewed focus on prioritizing Intis's interests. He sought to regain the advantages relinquished in the Southern Continent, bolster the economy, and transform the marketplace district.

Boulanger believed that the process of "Making Intis Glorious Again" would bestow upon the denizens of the marketplace district an abundance of employment opportunities, enabling them to amass wealth, whether through venturing into the Southern Continent, enlisting in the army, or capitalizing on foreign trade.

Hugues Artois, a candidate gaining considerable popularity of late, advocated for "More Jobs, For A Fairer Society." His pledge was to invigorate the economy, constructing additional factories in the southern region of the marketplace district, while simultaneously dismantling the shackles that bound factory owners, bankers, financiers, and merchants. However, his intentions also encompassed challenging the privileges enjoyed by the Church and the affluent, imposing heavier taxes upon them.

Jacques Sanson, a member of the Revolutionary Party, shared Hugues Artois's conviction that societal privileges had no place in the modern world. Regardless of one's affiliation with the Church or financial benefits, Sanson believed that everyone should pay equal taxes.

He boldly asserted that the current tariff policies hindered Intis's progress, particularly the city walls and the 54 checkpoints surrounding Trier. Sanson advocated for the free circulation of goods and the establishment of a liberated market, which would lead to the proliferation of factories and a significant increase in tax revenue. By taxing the privileged class alongside these reforms, the national treasury would swiftly recover from any initial setbacks.

When the time came, Sanson planned to explore the implementation of Emperor Roselle's envisioned annuity guarantee system, providing essential protection to the workers in the marketplace district.

His slogan resounded, "Take Down Those Damned Walls!"

Having finished reading the candidates' platforms, Lumian couldn't help but feel inclined to vote for Jacques Sanson.

While it remained uncertain whether Sanson possessed the capability to realize his ideas, cheaper alcohol and goods would bring tangible benefits and security to the people in the marketplace district.

As for taxing the privileged, they weren't overly concerned, as long as the burden didn't exceed a coppet.

Yet, it was evident that Jacques Sanson faced discrimination. His campaign posters were relegated to the farthest corners, barely visible. This treatment stemmed from the Revolutionary Party's perennial status as a minority within the National Convention.

As the Poison Spur Mob rallied behind Hugues Artois of the Enlightenment Party, Lumian directed his utmost attention towards this candidate. He not only perused Artois's election platform but also scrutinized his color photographs.

Artois, a man in his thirties, possessed a luxuriant head of black, fluffy hair with hints of gray at his temples. His nose stood tall and proud, complemented by deep blue eyes. His height commanded attention, and he exuded an air of refinement when dressed formally.

I can't allow this man to be elected… Unless I dismantle the Poison Spur Mob before that happens. However, the Mob still enjoys the mysterious support of Madame Moon. Even if one Black Scorpion falls, another Red Scorpion will emerge… Yes, the elections are set to commence this Sunday. The police headquarters, military police, and official Beyonders will be mobilized to vigilantly monitor each constituency. Causing trouble won't be easy… Should I involve the laborers, porters, and waiters of the Savoie Mob? Lumian contemplated how to secure the National Convention seat for both Matthew Boulanger and Jacques Sanson.

Lost in thought, he maintained a watchful eye on the window, hoping to catch sight of Louis Lund.

After a considerable time had passed, the golden sun ascended into the sky. Lumian realized that waiting was not a viable option.

Firstly, his identity posed a problem. He remained under the intense scrutiny of the Poison Spur Mob, preventing him from waiting in a building opposite "Black Scorpion" Roger's residence. Such a vantage point would limit his view and increase the risk of overlooking crucial details.

Secondly, as the leader of the Savoie Mob, he had numerous responsibilities to fulfill and required moments of respite. Waiting 24 hours a day for two straight days was simply unfeasible.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian was struck by an idea.

Why should I do it myself when I have so many subordinates and even hired Anthony Reid with my own money?

With that thought, Lumian rose from his seat and left the café, making his way towards Salle de Bal Brise.

As he reached the middle of Avenue du Marché, Lumian's attention was drawn to a gathering by the roadside. At the outskirts of the crowd stood a circle of black-uniformed police officers, while two rows of mounted officers observed the passersby.

Amidst the 200 to 300 people, there stood a makeshift wooden platform. A man in a black suit, sans bow tie, commanded the stage.

A massive poster displaying his photo adorned the outer wall of the house behind him. His resounding voice resonated through the streets.

“We need jobs. We need better income…

“I will construct more factories on Rue Saint-Hilaire…

“I pledge tax concessions for these factories…”

Ah, isn’t that Monsieur Hugues Artois? Lumian, utilizing his above-average Intis height, could clearly see the speaker on the wooden stage.

It was the elegant, black-haired, blue-eyed Hugues Artois, a candidate supported by the Poison Spur Mob!

Lumian listened for several seconds, his gaze instinctively scanning the upper levels of the building opposite Hugues Artois, examining the windows and roof.

As expected, he detected signs of police officers or individuals who clearly did not belong to the household.

He’s well-protected indeed… I cannot shoot Hugues Artois in the head or chest from those positions using a rifle… Lumian averted his gaze, a tinge of regret washing over him.

There was another way to ensure Hugues Artois’s defeat in the election, and that was to prevent him from participating altogether.

Those who perished would automatically forfeit their right to run!

Lumian had seriously contemplated the feasibility of this plan while at the café, but he concluded that it would stir up too much chaos. The market district mobs would likely be mobilized and used as scapegoats. He himself would fall into that category. If that happened, his true identity would likely be exposed, compelling him to flee the market district, if not Trier altogether. He would lose the opportunity to track down Madame Pualis and the padre.

Assassinating the candidate appeared to be quite a challenge. Even if he were fortunate enough to succeed, escape might not be guaranteed.

Lumian shifted his gaze to the people standing behind the wooden platform. They were most likely members of Hugues Artois’s campaign—a trio of men and two women.

Among them, there was a woman with fiery red hair, rumored to possess noble lineage. Her features were striking, with chiseled lines on her face, yet there was an overall air of neutrality to her beauty.

Tall and attired in a white and brown hunting suit, she was accompanied by four other individuals.

Fearful of missing Louis Lund, Lumian paid no heed to Hugues Artois's oration. He withdrew from the throng and made his way back to Salle de Bal Brise.

Noontime brought few patrons to the establishment. Some waiters and bartenders took a break, while others busied themselves with tidying up.

Addressing Louis and Sarkota, Lumian spoke up. "Dispatch four men to keep watch at 126 Avenue du Marché."

"126…" Louis repeated, his voice filled with astonishment. "Isn't that 'Black Scorpion' Roger's residence?"

Is the boss planning to stir up trouble for the Poison Spur Mob once again?

Lumian nodded, his expression candid.

"You've got it. Don't get too close and ensure you remain undetected. Stand guard from different vantage points and observe whether he appears among the passersby."

Lumian gestured toward the wanted posters adorning the wall, as well as Louis Lund, who stood nearby.

Since joining the Savoie Mob, Louis's own wanted poster had been discreetly moved to an even more inconspicuous spot.

Louis and Sarkota turned their attention to the wanted poster, carefully examining its contents. Words like "Cordu Village" caught their eye.

They grasped the general idea and readily agreed.

"Yes, Boss."

Once the four mobsters departed Salle de Bal Brise with the wanted poster in tow, Lumian turned to Louis and Sarkota.

"For the next few days, your task will be to maintain order on the first-floor dance hall."

Having issued his instructions, Lumian added nonchalantly, "I just caught snippets of Hugues Artois's speech. Not bad. Hmm… Whom does our Savoie Mob support as the market district's member of parliament?"

Louis cast a quick glance around and lowered his voice.

"The baron mentioned that he intends to vote for Monsieur Artois."

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Chapter 196 - 196 Elimination

196 Elimination

Hugues Artois? Lumian never anticipated such a response.

Did the competing Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob really endorse the same candidate?

If Hugues Artois succeeded, would he assist the Poison Spur Mob in dealing with the Savoie Mob? Or would he aid the Savoie Mob in completely overthrowing the Poison Spur Mob? Or would he demand peace between the two factions?

The more Lumian pondered it, the more he sensed that something was amiss.

If the influential figure behind both the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob was none other than Hugues Artois, then the two sides wouldn't have become bitter enemies to this extent!

Though Lumian played his part, wasn't he acting under the blessings of the Boss and Baron Brignais?

Furthermore, Hugues Artois wasn't an elected member of parliament. What authority did he have to protect both the Savoie Mob and the Poison Spur Mob?

The only plausible explanation was the machinations of the Enlightenment Party, but it made no sense for them to incite two rival mobs to fight each other to the death.

Lumian, lacking experience in this area, failed to find an answer even after considerable thought. All he could do was sigh with regret.

I can't employ the Savoie Mob's men to secretly intimidate voters into not supporting Hugues Artois!

He glanced at Louis, his confusion evident as he asked, "Why was I unaware that our Savoie Mob is backing Hugues Artois?"

Louis immediately grew tense.

"I assumed the baron had apprised you, Boss."

Wasn't that the purpose of the handover?

Baron Brignais was in a foul mood after losing the Salle de Bal Brise, so he couldn't be bothered to inform me about many things. In any case, I'll find out when I need to know? Lumian mumbled inwardly as he departed from Salle de Bal Brise and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

He proceeded directly to the third floor and made his way to Room 5, the dwelling of Anthony Reid, the information broker. Extending his hand, Lumian knocked on the wooden door.

Knocks reverberated, yet no response came.

He must not be present… That makes sense. How can an information broker stay holed up at home all the time… Lumian retrieved a note and fountain pen he carried with him and wrote on the note, using Anthony Reid's door as a surface:

"I've received intel that Louis Lund will be seen on Avenue du Marché from Saturday to Sunday. Keep a close watch on him. As soon as you spot him, notify me without delay. You can find me either in Room 207 at the motel or at Salle de Bal Brise. The agreed payment will be made promptly when the time comes.

"Ciel."

After sliding the note through the crevice of Room 305's door, Lumian returned to Salle de Bal Brise and settled in the café, patiently awaiting feedback.

Has Louis Lund been discovered? Lumian rose from his seat, eyeing his subordinate.

The mobster appeared inexplicably anxious, as if a famished lion had set its sights on him.

Without waiting for Lumian to inquire, he stammered in haste, "Boss, th-this is bad! I saw, I saw a group of police officers heading toward the depot!"

The depot? Isn't that under the boss's ownership? Ah, near the depot lies the warehouse belonging to "Rat" Christo… Could Franca's "report" have taken effect? Lumian swiftly contemplated a possibility.

This left him disheartened.

In his eyes, the mirror people and any potential harm they might bring couldn't hold a candle to a single strand of Louis Lund's hair!

Suppressing his emotions and residual excitement, Lumian spoke to his subordinate, "Understood. I'll handle it. Return to your original post and remain vigilant for the person depicted in the wanted poster. In half an hour, I'll send four others to relieve you."

"Yes, Boss." The gangster heaved a sigh of relief and made his way downstairs.

As Lumian watched him disappear, he gazed down at his trembling hands.

They still quivered slightly.

It was a result of the sudden surge of exhilaration he experienced when he thought his subordinate had brought news of Louis Lund.

At times, my emotional stability wavers… Fortunately, I have another psychiatric session scheduled for this Sunday… Lumian sighed inwardly, taking a seat and savoring his coffee.

In order to welcome Louis Lund in his finest state, he had refrained from ordering alcohol.

…

Outside the warehouses belonging to "Rat" Christo.

He, along with his subordinates and the porters, had gathered together, encircled by 20 to 30 armed police officers donning black uniforms.

Christo forced a fawning smile and addressed Superintendent Travis Everett, saying, "Monsieur Superintendent, why have you suddenly surrounded the warehouses? I'm a legitimate businessman!"

Everett, a man in his thirties with black-framed glasses and a broad chin, regarded Christo and spoke in a deep voice, "Do not assume that we are unaware of your usual dealings. We are not dealing with you because you abide by the rules and know what is permissible. Your only choice now is to cooperate with us and aid us in unraveling this as swiftly as possible."

Christo detected a glimmer of hope in Superintendent Everett's words and nodded.

"Alright, alright, no problem!"

He had already distributed the batch of goods from yesterday. As long as the genuine account books were not discovered, there was no concrete evidence to accuse him.

With his short black hair, Everett turned to the man standing beside him and said, "Monsieur Deputy Assistant Commissioner, you may proceed."

The man had a rugged appearance, sporting fluffy blond hair, golden eyebrows, and a beard. He wore a slightly smaller black police uniform, but his buttons were crafted from gold.

Adorning his epaulet was a silver-white seven-petal scented iris, accompanied by an off-white diamond square.

This emblem indicated the rank of Deputy Assistant Commissioner.

The police department in Trier had four ranks, in ascending order: Chief Superintendent, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner.

Of these, there was only one Deputy Commissioner—the head of Trier's police department. Across the entire Intis Republic, the minister of the National Police Department, a Commissioner, held a higher rank.

The Assistant Commissioner and Deputy Assistant Commissioner served as Trier's Police Department's Deputy Minister and Police Committee members. Their epaulets displayed off-white diamond squares beside the seven-petaled irises. There were four Commissioners, three Deputy Commissioners, two Assistant Commissioners, and one Deputy Assistant Commissioner, with no Chief Superintendents.

In other words, this uncouth man with blond hair and a golden beard held an equal rank to Aymerck, the Police Committee member in charge of the entire Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman. However, Christo was entirely unfamiliar with him.

"Just call me Angoulême," the rugged Deputy Assistant Commissioner replied succinctly.

His gaze swept across Christo, Erkin, and the others, inexplicably making them feel as if they were staring at the blinding sun, forcing them to lower their heads.

Angoulême averted his gaze and instructed the plain-clothes team behind him, "You may bring that object forward now."

Two team members approached the nearby four-wheeled carriage and unveiled a wide, flat, and sizable object covered in a black velvet curtain.

They positioned the object beside Angoulême.

Angoulême locked eyes with "Rat" Christo and the others, subtly raising his chin, and uttered,

"Line up in front of me, one by one."

Christo sensed the kid in his pocket trembling visibly. He surmised that Angoulême was an official Beyonder, someone of considerable power.

After a few moments of contemplation, he approached Angoulême fearfully, not daring to resist.

Suddenly, Angoulême pulled open the black velvet curtain, revealing the complete appearance of the object beside him.

It was a full-body mirror, simple and unadorned, mounted on a stand of rusted iron-black.

Christo's reflection appeared instantly in the mirror, capturing every detail.

Christo remained unaware of anything amiss, but Erkin's expression underwent a drastic change behind him.

Erkin abruptly turned to the left, attempting to escape.

Almost 20 others followed suit, including laborers and porters.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Angoulême's team had already prepared, raising their arms and squeezing the triggers.

Bullets struck those fleeing, but it was as if they struck an illusion, passing through them and landing in the distance.

Angoulême calmly extended his left hand and adjusted the position of the full-body mirror beside him.

The mirror reflected Erkin's figure against a dark background.

Erkin froze in place, maintaining his running posture.

In an instant, he was drawn towards the full-body mirror, a look of horror etched on his face.

As soon as the two collided, Erkin's body vanished.

In the blink of an eye, he reappeared in the mirror, his face stained with blood. His expression turned sinister, consumed by hatred and resentment.

He opened his mouth as if to scream, but an invisible force pulled him into the unnaturally dark backdrop of the mirror, and he vanished.

Witnessing this, Christo stood dumbfounded, forgetting to aid his brother.

One thought echoed in his mind: There's something terribly wrong with them…

Meanwhile, Angoulême's subordinates worked to control the fleeing individuals. The ordinary people caught in the midst of the chaos cowered on the ground, heads lowered, trembling with fear.

…

In Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian sat at the bar counter, listening to Jenna's captivating singing. Two hours ago, he had received news that "Rat" Christo was unharmed, but a group of his subordinates had perished.

Quite efficient… Lumian inwardly commended the official Beyonders in the market district.

As the risqué song came to an end, a woman who had been waiting on the sidelines took the stage and hurriedly approached a young band member. She sobbed and cried out twice.

It seemed she was delivering news of someone's death.

The band member stood frozen, shocked by the news, unable to react for a moment.

After a few seconds, he flung aside the six-string zither strapped to him and dashed off the stage.

However, he only managed a few steps before he stumbled and fell heavily to the ground. He struggled to rise but failed.

In the next moment, tears streamed down his face.

Jenna, adorned in a shimmering red dress, observed him for a few seconds before pressing her lips together. Eventually, she didn't offer consolation, allowing the band member and the grieving woman to weep.

She quietly stepped down from the stage and crossed paths with Lumian, who had left the bar counter.

"What happened?" Lumian inquired.

Jenna let out a soft sigh and replied, "His father passed away in an accident a few hours ago. I know him. Learning to play a musical instrument hasn't been easy for him. His father works as a porter, and his mother is a dishwasher. Without their unwavering support, he would be limited to manual labor…"

An accident a few hours ago… A porter… Lumian roughly pieced together the cause.

He gazed silently at the stage.

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Chapter 197 - 197 Helper

197 Helper

After the band member and his mother got time off from René, Salle de Bal Brise's manager, the drumbeats reverberated through the air, signaling the start of a new round of dancing.

Lumian turned his gaze to Jenna, who stood by his side, and spoke in a casual tone.

"I thought you would offer him some comfort. After all, you know him well and often collaborate with their band."

Jenna, dressed in a stunning red sequined dress that revealed a generous amount of her chest, pressed her lips together and responded calmly.

"In that moment just now, what he needed wasn't comforting words but a release. Offering condolences would only worsen his pain."

Lumian scrutinized Jenna for a few moments.

"You seem to understand it quite well. Why do I have a feeling that you've experienced something similar yourself?"

Jenna lowered her gaze to her toes and smiled softly.

"A few years ago, I went through the same thing when my father passed away.

"One day, before dawn, my mother took me to the rooftop of our apartment and stayed with me until the sunrise. I witnessed the gradual brightening of the sky, from pitch black to a deep blue. It grew lighter and lighter, and I saw the clouds adorned with shades of bright gold and other colors.

"In that moment, she told me that darkness would eventually pass, and the sun would rise. Light would always find its way to illuminate the land.

"When he returns to the band, I'll find an opportunity to share something similar with him."

Lumian listened in silence, letting out a sigh. "You have a wonderful mother."

"Yes." Jenna accepted the compliment with pride.

Lumian chuckled and remarked, “You managed to say so much without resorting to curses. That’s unlike you.”

Moreover, she appeared rather refined.

“Damnit! Do you think I’m the type of person who curses incessantly?” Jenna cursed indignantly and made her way to the break room to prepare for the next song.

Lumian settled back at the bar counter, his mind preoccupied with another matter.

He had therapy scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, and there was a possibility of Louis Lund showing up on Sunday.

What if he missed it?

Lumian’s initial impulse was to write a letter to Madam Magician and request her to check with his psychiatrist, Madam Susie, about the possibility of rescheduling the treatment by a day. However, he couldn’t shake off the feeling of his condition being unstable for the past two days. If he didn’t act promptly, he might face severe consequences when tracking down Louis Lund.

Even though Madame Pualis wasn’t exactly Madame Night, Lumian couldn’t confront her directly. His primary objective was to locate the survivor from Cordu and engage in a friendly conversation with her.

Lumian didn’t hold much animosity towards Madame Pualis. While she believed in an evil god and had involvement in Cordu, it appeared that she wasn’t responsible for the disaster. She had departed before the ritual took place under some compulsion.

Hence, if he allowed himself to become unstable and reacted impulsively, escalating the conflict with Madame Pualis and making her his enemy, matters would become exceedingly troublesome, and he might even lose his life.

As for the dispute with the Poison Spur Mob, a problem with Madame Moon didn’t equate to matters involving Madame Night.

After careful consideration, Lumian devised a plan to find someone who could track Louis Lund on his behalf and follow him to his residence in Trier.

There’s no need to consider individuals without Beyonder powers. They simply wouldn’t be able to keep up with him.

There are two viable options. The first is Anthony Reid, an information broker suspected of being a Beyonder from the Psychiatrist pathway. He possesses excellent tracking abilities and has already accepted my commission, receiving a deposit. Since the task involves locating Louis Lund, it naturally falls within the scope of the mission. If Anthony proves difficult, I’m prepared to offer more money.

The second option is Franca. She, along with Aurore, belongs to the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Franca knows my true identity and displays a certain level of concern for me. She is trustworthy to some extent, not to mention that she still owes me a favor. Franca possesses enough power to tail Louis Lund and even intercept him if necessary. As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, he rose from his seat, making his way to the bedroom on the second floor and leaving Salle de Bal Brise through the window.

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305.

Lumian knocked on the wooden door.

"Please come in," Anthony Reid responded in a West Midseashire Coast accent.

The door slowly swung open.

The information broker stood before Lumian once more.

His plump face, once slick with oiliness, appeared freshly scrubbed, enhancing his air of honesty.

Wearing a grayish-blue worker's uniform, he seemed to have spent the entire day in the southern part of the market district and Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

"I've read your note," Anthony Reid said, running a hand through his receding light-yellow hairline. "I've been keeping an eye on Avenue du Marché."

Lumian felt a slight unease, but he surveyed the room and spoke directly.

"I have other matters to attend to between 2:30 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. tomorrow. If you happen to spot the target during that time, don't inform me. Simply follow him and ascertain his place of residence."

Anthony Reid locked his dark brown eyes onto Lumian's for a few seconds.

"Very well."

He made no mention of an additional fee, and Lumian was content not to broach the subject either.

…

3 Rue des Blouses Blanches housed a relatively new apartment building. Its beige facade boasted a charming curvature, featuring numerous irregular walls adorned with a variety of statues. Angels, animals, celebrities, and legendary objects found their place amidst the architecture. The building boasted an abundance of large windows, wall pillars, and scroll art, creating an atmosphere of grandeur.

Lumian stood before Room 601 and pressed the doorbell.

With a jingling sound, Franca swung open the dark-red door.

Her flaxen hair cascaded naturally and voluminously, while she wore a loose white silk nightgown that gracefully reached her knees. The wide-open collar revealed a fair expanse of skin.

Observing that the other party showed no signs of wariness and wasn't even wearing a bra, Lumian made a conscious effort to keep his gaze focused.

Before opening the door, Franca seemed to already know the identity of the visitor. She greeted him with a smile.

"Coming to seek knowledge in mysticism?

"After all our discussions, you've finally arrived."

"No, it's something else," Lumian responded, gesturing towards the room, indicating that they should speak inside.

Franca turned and walked towards the sofa, Lumian following closely behind. As he entered, he instinctively scanned his surroundings.

This apartment consisted of two bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen. The furnishings in the living room, such as the sofa, coffee table, dining table, chairs, and cupboards, were predominantly beige, iron-black, silver-white, or light gray. The colors were muted and lacked vibrancy. The overall aesthetic was one of simplicity and cleanliness, but it also exuded a touch of coldness. It stood in stark contrast to the living room styles found in most households.

Lumian took a seat on the edge of the divan while Franca curled her legs and reclined on the adjacent armchair, revealing her alluring curves.

"What brings you here?" Franca inquired.

Lumian pointed towards her.

"Aren't you considering changing your clothes?"

Franca glanced down at her nightgown and came to a realization.

"Perhaps it's because you know my original gender. When I'm around you, I always have this illusion that I'm still a man and forget to pay attention to such details."

A smile played on her lips. Rather than changing her attire, she shifted her sitting posture, accentuating her allure even further.

After a few moments, she even left her recliner and settled beside Lumian.

Sensing Lumian's perplexed gaze, she chuckled and remarked, "Since you won't peek, why should I bother changing?"

She made a playful gesture, unreservedly teasing him.

"Madame, you have a wicked sense of humor." Lumian sighed.

Franca grinned and replied, "Life is already tough. I need to seek some amusement for myself.

"But I'm considered fine. There's a group of individuals in the Research Society who harbor little hope for the future and have made it their life goal to pursue enjoyment. They've formed a group called April Fools' Day. Your sister must have mentioned it, right?"

"She did," Lumian confirmed, recalling reading about it in Aurore's grimoires.

Franca refrained from elaborating and fixed her gaze upon Lumian, her eyes resembling calm lakes, awaiting an explanation for his visit.

Lumian spoke directly, his words carrying a certain bluntness.

"I require a favor."

"Oh?" Franca responded cooperatively, her tone laced with curiosity.

Lumian took a moment to contemplate before continuing.

"Considering you've seen my wanted poster, you must possess some knowledge regarding it.

"I've received information that one of the individuals depicted, a man by the name of Louis Lund, will make an appearance on Avenue du Marché tomorrow. He maintains close ties with the masterminds behind the Poison Spur Mob.

"My intention is to apprehend him and unveil the truth behind the catastrophe in Cordu. However, I'll be preoccupied with crucial matters tomorrow afternoon, so I can't personally await his arrival. I hope you could lend me your assistance. Should he show, tail him and ascertain his whereabouts. If you feel confident, aid me in capturing him. He once possessed Beyonder powers equivalent to a Sequence 8 and is likely a Gardener, though I cannot say for certain at present.

"After acquiring the mirror, you did promise to compensate me. This would be it."

Franca retorted angrily, "This concerns Muggle's death. I will most certainly help. Compensation is not an appropriate term in this context."

"Tailing him doesn't count. But attacking him counts?" Lumian proposed.

Discerning the underlying polite and detached nature of his request, Franca did not insist and simply nodded.

“That works too.”

Curiosity danced across her countenance as she posed another query.

“What could be more pressing than apprehending this individual named Louis Lund?

“I expected you to be more concerned about uncovering the truth behind Cordu.”

Lumian pondered briefly before speaking candidly, “The Cordu disaster has left me grappling with certain psychological issues. I am presently undergoing regular treatment. I fear that without timely follow-up, I will lose control of my emotions, thus jeopardizing my quest for the truth.”

Franca nodded sympathetically, displaying her understanding.

Taking the initiative, she offered a suggestion.

“Would you like me to find a genuine psychiatrist—one with Beyonder powers—for you?”

“My psychiatrist already possesses them,” Lumian revealed, withholding nothing.

Franca refrained from prying further, recalling that Muggle’s brother participated in other mystical gatherings.

Lumian mentioned the attributes of a Villain and a Gardener, as well as the existence of Anthony Reid. He provided a detailed description of Reid’s appearance to ensure Franca wouldn’t mistake him for a companion of Louis Lund, potentially leading to unnecessary conflict.

With that, Lumian rose from his seat, signaling his intention to depart.

Franca stood up, amused. “You’ve come all this way. Aren’t you interested in delving into the mysteries of mysticism?”

“Louise Lund may make an appearance tonight as well,” Lumian remarked, eager to return to Salle de Bal Brise as swiftly as possible.

At that precise moment, both he and Franca directed their attention toward the door.

Light footfalls resonated from the stairs before halting nearby.

Franca glanced at the peephole from a distance, her expression suddenly morphing into one of peculiarity.

In hushed tones, she addressed Lumian, “Jenna!”

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Chapter 198 - 198 Conciliation

198 Conciliation

Beneath the open window of Room 601, Lumian scaled the wall with his bare hands, aided by the protrusions, statues, and pipes. His descent was swift and steady, story after story, until he made a final leap and landed gracefully on the edge of Rue des Blouses Blanches. He grumbled under his breath, “Why am I forced to climb down from the sixth floor? I haven’t done anything!”

Lumian slipped into the shadows and made his way towards Avenue du Marché.

In Room 601.

Franca cast a fleeting glance at the swaying window, adjusting her silk nightgown before approaching the slowly opening door, wearing a smile.

Dressed in a sequined red dress, Jenna stored away the spare key Franca had entrusted to her and entered the apartment.

“Why are you here so early today?” Franca inquired, blocking Jenna’s path to the window, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Jenna let out a sigh and replied, “Something happened to the band’s six-stringed zither player. While it didn’t affect my singing, it put everyone in a foul mood. The dance hall manager, René, asked me to end the performance early and switch tonight’s theme to cheek-to-cheek dancing.”

The cheek-to-cheek dance in the market district differed from the usual version. It involved intimate embraces and provocative movements between men and women on the dance floor. It was an exhilarating experience, but dance halls needed enough female dancers to organize it.

Attempting to find a topic of conversation, Franca asked, “What happened exactly?” She discreetly calculated the time it would take for Lumian to descend to the first floor, all the while grumbling internally, Why is Muggle’s brother a Hunter instead of an Assassin? Assassins can effortlessly leap from the sixth floor and land as light as a feather!

Jenna recounted the band member’s unfortunate incident and concluded, “Dammit, why do unlucky people always attract more misfortune?”

“Yes, even though the performance ended earlier than usual, it’s still late. Going home would be quite troublesome. I’ll sleep at your place.”

Given that Jenna lived far away from Avenue du Marché, she often sought refuge at Franca's whenever she performed late into the night at the dance hall. She even had a spare key.

Warehouse… porter… Recalling the information provided by her subordinate, Franca surmised that it must be related to the matter involving "Rat" Christo.

As she let out a sigh, contemplating how the innocent had lost their kin, Franca inwardly expressed her sorrow.

Brother 007 is incredibly efficient. I only informed him about the mirror people late last night, and the official Beyonders have already dealt with the anomaly before this evening.

Brother 007 was the code name of a man from the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, a member of an official organization in Trier. His rank seemed quite high, and Franca had secret connections with many fellow researchers in Trier, often organizing private gatherings with them.

However, Franca knew that the matters involving the mirror people wouldn't end there. The special mirror world still existed, the mystery artifact that Gardner Martin smuggled into Trier remained, and the classic silver mirror in her possession persisted. If these elements weren't eliminated entirely, it would only solve the problem temporarily. Franca couldn't predict when similar anomalies would arise in the future.

Franca approached the classic-styled silver mirror, which allowed entry into the special mirror world, with caution and seriousness. She believed it held a secret related to the Demoness pathway.

"Why are you so quiet?" Jenna asked, extending her right hand and waving it in front of Franca.

Franca snapped back to reality and let out a sigh.

"I feel a bit sad upon hearing about their misfortune."

It was precisely because she didn't want to face the pain of countless innocents that she followed Lumian's suggestion and "handed over" the matter to the officials.

Jenna bypassed Franca and made her way to the guest room, intending to change into more comfortable attire.

"It was a bit stuffy," Franca quickly explained.

Jenna regarded her with suspicion.

"Why did you feel the need to explain?"

Ahem… Franca nearly choked on her own saliva.

Thankfully, Jenna didn't dwell on it too much. She entered the guest room and headed towards the washroom, carrying her nightgown and pajamas.

…

Once Lumian returned to Avenue du Marché, he began his rounds, starting with Unit 126, where "Black Scorpion" Roger resided. He approached the four mobsters disguised as beggars stationed at different entrances, far from their intended target. Lumian made a promise to each of them, guaranteeing 100 verl d'or by Monday.

That night, he struggled to find rest in Salle de Bal Brise. Occasionally, he would wake up, straining his ears for any signs of movement outside the window, hoping to catch the sound of hurried footsteps.

At dawn, while enjoying breakfast at the café and skimming through a newspaper, Louis ascended from the first floor and whispered in Lumian's ear, "Boss, Superintendent Everett requests your presence at the Valiant café, opposite the police headquarters, for a cup of coffee precisely at 10 a.m."

Superintendent Everett wants to meet me, the newly appointed leader of the Savoie Mob? Lumian remained relatively composed with the Mystery Prying Glasses in his possession.

He asked Louis, "Who else will be there?"

"Many," Louis responded in a hushed tone. "They say all the mob leaders from the market district will gather. The official voting begins today."

The voting would extend over three days.

Is that so… So they won't let us disrupt the National Convention election, it seems. I wonder if the Poison Spur Mob will attend? Lumian nodded and left Salle de Bal Brise at 9:15 a.m., making his way back to Auberge du Coq Doré.

In Room 207, he put on the Mystery Prying Glasses, experiencing the disorienting sensation of descending from great heights and burrowing into the ground.

Suppressing the urge to retch, Lumian retrieved a mirror and all his cosmetics, busying himself with preparations.

He opted for subtle alterations, focusing on thickening his eyebrows, accentuating his cheekbones, and enhancing shadowy areas. The adjustments created an impression that it was indeed Ciel and not someone else.

As soon as he finished his makeup, Lumian hastily set the mirror aside, unwilling to catch a glimpse of his reflection.

Shortly before 10 a.m., he arrived at the Valiant café and was promptly escorted to a private room by a waiter.

Upon entering, he immediately recognized several familiar faces—Baron Brignais, adorned in formal attire with a top hat and pipe; Franca, sporting trousers, red boots, and a blouse; the towering "Giant" Simon; and the merchant-like figure of "Blood Palm" Black.

Seated in an armchair at the head of the table, Travis Everett, donning a black uniform, rose with a smile upon seeing Lumian enter.

"You must be Ciel, am I right?"

"Yes, Superintendent Everett," Lumian responded respectfully.

Franca, Baron Brignais, and the others, who had risen alongside Travis Everett, exchanged puzzled glances as they observed Lumian.

Franca's gaze averted in enlightenment as she recognized the golden-black hair. Baron Brignais, Giant Simon, and the rest gradually "realized" that it was Ciel.

Adjusting his black-framed glasses, Superintendent Everett's blue eyes gleamed as he half-praised Lumian and patted the recliner beside him.

"You've only been in the market district for less than three weeks, but you've already taken over Salle de Bal Brise. And you're so young. You're really outstanding.

"Sigh, the market district hasn't been peaceful for the past month."

He half-praised Lumian and patted a recliner beside him.

"Come, have a seat here.

"Let me introduce you to the others."

When Lumian stood by Everett's side, the superintendent gestured toward a middle-aged man seated across the coffee table and spoke, "Roger, you're acquainted with him, aren't you?"

"Black Scorpion" Roger? Lumian directed his gaze at the middle-aged man.

Roger, dressed in formal attire with neatly combed black hair, had a slightly chubby face, and his deep-blue eyes resembled the vast sea.

"We're meeting for the first time," Lumian replied with a smile. He noticed a chilling gaze emanating from Black Scorpion.

Everett proceeded to introduce the individuals sitting beside Roger.

“Harman, Castina.”

Upon entering the private room, Lumian had noticed only Harman among the few members of the Savoie Mob. The bald man’s shining head was so eye-drawing that Lumian almost looked away, fearing that it might reflect his disguised appearance.

Upon closer inspection, Lumian recognized Harman’s unique features—a prominent brow, a high nose bridge, and deep-set lips. He possessed the allure of a ruggedly handsome individual. Even in a seated position, his imposing height was evident, complementing his dark breeches shirt splendidly.

Castina, petite and likely under 1.55 meters tall, appeared to be around 30 years old. She possessed curly auburn hair, brown eyes, a curvaceous figure that turned heads, and full lips.

“You should be familiar with Ciel from the Savoie Mob, right?” Everett introduced Ciel to Roger and the others.

Roger flashed a cold smile.

“Indeed, Superintendent. The impression he made on me will never fade.”

“Baldy” Harman’s eyes brimmed with hatred and cruelty.

Everett sighed and said, “We all reside in the market district. Only by coexisting peacefully can we secure a better future and greater wealth.

“If any conflicts arise, come to me. I’ll mediate and arbitrate.

“Ciel, take this cup of coffee to Roger and hand over Salle de Bal Brise’s profits for the next six months. The issue between Margot and Ait ends here. If anyone troubles you regarding these matters again, feel free to inform me directly.”

Lumian observed Roger, Harman, and Castina with a sense of amusement, realizing that their eyes held no mercy, only restrained coldness and malevolence.

Baron Brignais and the others remained silent, watching the scene unfold as though it were a spectacle. Franca shook her head at Lumian, signaling him not to act recklessly.

Lumian bent down and picked up the cup of coffee from the table.

Suddenly, he raised his hands and flung the contents of the cup at “Black Scorpion” Roger.

Reacting swiftly, Roger evaded the liquid, colliding with the coffee table. Harman and Castina sprang to their feet.

Simultaneously, Lumian pointed at “Black Scorpion” Roger and cursed, “F*ck you! Are you disregarding the Superintendent’s words? Playing dumb, are we? If you don’t desire peace, speak up. I, Ciel, shall await you at Salle de Bal Brise!

“The look in your eyes tells me vengeance is on your mind!”

How brazen… Franca had not anticipated Lumian’s audacity.

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Chapter 199 - 199 “Unruly”

199 “Unruly”

Travis Everett concealed his emotions behind the black-framed glasses, rendering them inscrutable.

Nevertheless, he made no attempt to halt Lumian’s actions. It was as though he had transformed into a mere observer.

Baron Brignais, “Blood Palm” Black, and the rest were taken aback by Lumian’s reaction. They couldn’t fathom his audacity to splash coffee at “Black Scorpion” Roger in front of the superintendent and sabotage the mediation.

In particular, Baron Brignais felt as though he was encountering his former subordinate, now colleague, for the very first time.

Is he far more unruly and reckless than I had anticipated?

Does he refuse to accept any grievances and is unwilling to pay any price?

Although he attempted to shift the blame onto “Black Scorpion” Roger and the others, it was evident to anyone with a modicum of sense and perception that Lumian was the instigator of the conflict, driven by a strong will of his own.

Clearly, he had no intention of reconciliation. He sought only an excuse to undermine Superintendent Everett’s proposal.

Is this not a blatant slap in Superintendent Everett’s face?

The superintendent wielded considerable influence in the market district. A slight embellishment in reporting to higher authorities, or rather, stating the unvarnished truth, would draw the attention of official Beyonders and dismantle all our enterprises, including the leaders of the Savoie Mob!

Incensed, “Baldy” Harman denied Lumian the opportunity to shatter the coffee cup on his boss. He lunged forward, stooped down, grasped the coffee table’s edge, hoisted it, and flung it at the detestable individual.

Cups clattered to the ground, splintering into shards. Lumian deftly evaded the projectiles, swiftly drawing his black revolver from beneath his arm. He trained it on Harman amid the cacophonous crash of objects and the ensuing chaos.

“Baldy” Harman chuckled, a product of his extreme rage.

“You country hog, do you spurn Superintendent Everett’s gracious offer of mediation?

“Very well then, our Poison Spur Mob shall entertain you until one of us is vanquished from this game!

“Go ahead, fire away. Your audacity and lack of respect towards Superintendent Everett know no bounds. If you possess such ability, then pull the trigger!”

Were it not for the impending election and the stringent surveillance imposed by officials, the Poison Spur Mob would have long seized an opportunity to assassinate Ciel!

In that instant, “Black Scorpion” Roger rose once more. Black flames materialized within his clenched fists, only to dissipate swiftly.

He was reluctant to unveil his Beyonder powers in the presence of Superintendent Everett.

“Short-legged Candlestick” Castina also fixed her gaze on Lumian, poised to strike if he refused to relent.

Upon hearing “Baldy” Harman’s retort and provocation, Lumian chuckled.

Bang!

Lumian squeezed the trigger, unleashing a yellow bullet hurtling directly towards “Baldy” Harman’s skull.

His reflexes barely saved him. Harman crouched down just in time, his eyes widening in alarm.

The bullet grazed his glistening scalp and careened off, ricocheting into the adjacent washroom with a metallic clang.

In an instant, all the mob leaders sprang to their feet. “Black Scorpion” Roger and “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina fixated on Lumian, preparing to retaliate.

Undeterred, Lumian remained resolute. He lowered his gun and aimed it once more at “Baldy” Harman, his gaze devoid of any emotion.

“Enough!”

At that very moment, Superintendent Everett, who had been calmly seated, spoke up.

The indescribable authority emanating from him, combined with his esteemed position, compelled Lumian to instinctively halt his finger from pulling the trigger.

Seizing the opportunity, “Baldy” Harman shifted his position and rose to his feet.

Though the others maintained their combative stance, the palpable tension that had lingered dissipated.

Lamenting his missed chance, Lumian reluctantly holstered his revolver and turned to face Everett.

“Superintendent, I am willing to comply with your request, but they don’t seem inclined to do so.”

Everett’s eyes flickered behind his black-framed spectacles. Standing up, he surveyed the room.

“We will address your conflict after the election.

“For the next three days, I expect all of you to conduct yourselves properly. Fail to do so, and you shall make an enemy out of me. Trust me, that’s a predicament you won’t be able to handle.”

Although Everett’s voice carried depth, his tone remained calm, devoid of anger or arrogance. Instead, a hint of sincerity permeated his words.

Yet, those who had resided in the market district for more than two years recalled a term: the “Valiant Mob.”

Two years prior, the Valiant Mob held a similar status to the Savoie Mob in the market district. However, due to their repeated defiance and disrespect towards Superintendent Everett, they were ruthlessly eradicated in a joint operation conducted by the authorities. The subsequent rise of the Poison Spur Mob was partly due to the power vacuum left behind in the district’s underworld.

Now, only the Valiant café stood as a testament to the existence of such a mob.

The leaders of the Savoie Mob, the Poison Spur Mob, and the other two medium-sized gangs fell into silence for a few seconds before responding to Superintendent Everett’s words. They expressed their commitment to restrain their subordinates and ensure that the election proceeded without disruption.

Superintendent Everett’s gaze swept across their faces. Without uttering another word, he strode towards the exit of the private room.

As he disappeared beyond the door, “Black Scorpion” Roger, “Baldy” Harman, and “Short-legged Candlestick” Castina cast Lumian cold glances before departing from the café.

The remaining gang leaders didn’t linger, leaving only the Savoie Mob in the confines of the private room.

Baron Brignais took a leisurely puff from his pipe and addressed Lumian, “You acted too impulsively back there.”

Lumian offered a faint smile in response and replied, “I have been awaiting an opportunity like that. Unfortunately, I couldn’t seize it to incite the conflict.”

Observing the puzzled expressions on the faces of “Giant” Simon, “Blood Palm” Black, and the others, Lumian calmly elaborated, “We have already made two attempts, and the Poison Spur Mob chose to endure. Baron, as you have rightly pointed out, they harbor a significant problem, and they await their chance. I believe that opportunity will present itself soon.

“If we fail to incapacitate the Poison Spur Mob before then, we shall face their unhinged retaliation. And when that moment arrives, none of you will be able to escape.

“Just a moment ago, there were only three members of the Poison Spur Mob present, while we numbered five. Red Boots, your strength is comparable to that of Black Scorpion. With my assistance, you can surely overpower him. Baron, Simon, Black, is it conceivable that you cannot handle Baldy and Short-legged Candlestick? One of you might even be able to impede Superintendent Everett.

“As long as the Poison Spur Mob dares to strike back, we shall eliminate them all right here!”

“Rat” Christo had received instructions from Superintendent Everett the previous night that he was not to be invited today.

Baron Brignais, “Blood Palm” Black, and their comrades found Ciel’s words reasonable, yet a deep-seated fear for this individual arose within their hearts.

He wasn’t bluffing. He genuinely desired to eliminate “Baldy” Harman and the others!

He was too crazy and extreme!

He possessed the audacity to commit any act without hesitation!

“But this is tantamount to slapping Superintendent Everett in the face. The repercussions will be exceedingly troublesome.” “Blood Palm” Black shook his head.

Franca shared the same concern. She wished to caution Lumian that such a course of action would render him unwelcome in the market district. He might even end up with another wanted poster.

However, recognizing that the other leaders were present and unable to reveal her true friendship with Lumian, Franca sealed her lips.

A quizzical smile played on Lumian’s lips as he inquired, “Wasn’t Superintendent Everett killed by the Poison Spur Mob?”

Lunatic… This notion raced through everyone’s minds.

Baron Brignais, gently stroking his mahogany-colored pipe, chimed in, “It’s nearly impossible to conceal that from official Beyonders. It’s merely an excuse.”

“In that case, let it go. Blame everything on a lunatic like me. At worst, I’ll depart from the market district. I trust the Boss will arrange another task for me once this storm blows over,” Lumian calmly remarked, a serene smile gracing his face.

This was indeed a fragment of his genuine thoughts.

Mr. K’s mission revolved around earning Gardner Martin’s trust, not running Salle de Bal Brise or establishing a foothold in the market district!

If his provocation had genuinely enraged “Black Scorpion” Roger and his accomplices, Lumian believed that Franca would surely come to his aid. With one of the Savoie Mob’s leaders on his side, the others wouldn’t hesitate to act. When the time came, united in strength, they stood a high chance of eliminating the remaining three leaders of the Poison Spur Mob.

Once he unraveled the Poison Spur Mob’s scheme, Gardner Martin would undoubtedly appreciate Lumian’s daring and unorthodox approach in eradicating hidden threats. Even if he lost Salle de Bal Brise and was compelled to “escape” once more, he would merely find sanctuary elsewhere in Trier and continue serving Gardner Martin until he gained his complete approval.

Furthermore, it was advantageous for Lumian. If the Poison Spur Mob finalized their preparations, he would be their primary target for revenge. Failing to address the issue beforehand would only heighten the danger he faced. In the future, even if Madame Moon birthed another group, Lumian wouldn’t fret. Today, Louis Lund would likely be present in the market district. By temporarily suppressing the deaths of “Black Scorpion” Roger and his cronies, creating a fa?ade of tranquility, Lumian could patiently await his target at 126 Avenue du Marché.

These individuals weren’t parliamentary candidates whose demise would incite an uproar.

After a few moments of silence, Baron Brignais approached the door and issued a reminder, “Superintendent Everett has probably marked you. There will be considerable trouble after the election.”

Lumian responded with a smile, “Perhaps he will mysteriously vanish one day.”

Having said that, Lumian calmly endured the mildly apprehensive gazes of “Giant” Simon and his comrades.

You see, having laid the groundwork, anything I utter now will convince them all.

…

At 3:15 p.m., Lumian arrived at Quartier du Jardin Botanique in a public carriage. Once again, he beheld Mason Café, housed in a beige four-story building adorned

with lush green plants entwined on its outer walls.

Passing through a sheltered walkway upheld by pillars, he entered the interior, enveloped by dark-green walls and expansive windows. Settling into the familiar Booth D, he removed his wide-brimmed round hat.

“A cup of Intis coffee,” he instructed the waitress and patiently waited.

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Chapter 200 - 200 Spectator

200 Spectator

The titular coffee was rich and aromatic, a perfect match for the creamy cupcake. Though Lumian's focus was elsewhere, he still appreciated their beauty.

The moment the clock struck 3:30 p.m., a familiar soft female voice reached him from the booth behind.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee."

"Good afternoon, Madame Susie," Lumian responded, concealing his surprise.

While Lumian didn't intentionally observe the customers entering Mason Café, his Hunter instincts allowed him to maintain awareness of his surroundings.

When he had arrived at the café at 3:18 p.m., Cabin D had been deserted. No one entered from 3:15 to 3:30 p.m.

And yet, here was Madame Susie, appearing silently behind him, in the very spot behind Booth D!

How mystical and bizarre was this!

Susie's voice gently inquired once more, "How did you feel after your last treatment?"

Lumian didn't hold back and responded simply, "I felt much better than before. At least I could release my emotions."

"That's a good thing. Suppressing your feelings and bottling up your emotions will only exacerbate your mental problems and lead you down a self-destructive path until your innate will to live is completely overwhelmed," Susie commented in a calm and soothing tone, confirming Lumian's transformation.

A hint of a smile laced her words.

"Let's have a conversation first. We'll discuss all the things you've encountered in the past two weeks. Feel free to choose what you believe you can and are willing to share."

Lumian knew he needed to calm himself and undergo further psychiatric treatment as a foundation for unlocking more memories later. Hence, he offered no resistance. He chuckled wryly and said, "There's nothing I can't tell you. I've even

shared that dream with you. Everything else can only be classified as minor secrets."

He paused for a moment and began with Charlie.

"There's an unlucky and dim-witted fellow at the motel I'm staying at…"

Lumian casually recounted the events of the past two weeks.

Gradually, his mind relaxed, as if he had returned to a time before Cordu's destruction.

Aurore, who rarely ventured outside, would hear about everything that transpired in Cordu from him. He delighted in sharing it with his sister, even boasting about the successful pranks he had orchestrated.

As time trickled away, Lumian's rigid posture softened as he sank into the plush sofa.

He refrained from delving into further details. Time was limited, and he couldn't afford to waste it. He didn't touch upon the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Franca's true gender, or his suspicions regarding her motives for joining the Savoie Mob. He merely mentioned his encounter with a pen pal of Aurore's—a Sequence 7 Witch of the Demoness pathway, who happened to be in the same mob.

Likewise, he provided only a brief mention of performing a ritual and receiving an additional boon, without going into the specifics.

After recounting his experiences from the past two weeks, Lumian spoke in a self-deprecating tone, "I can't help but wonder if it's my own fault for stumbling upon so many Beyonder events in such a short span of time. Sometimes, I question why every human and dog in Trier seems to possess Beyonder powers."

For once, Susie didn't respond immediately. After a few moments, she smiled and replied, "I can perceive that your mental state has indeed improved compared to before."

"How can you tell?" Lumian didn't mention the details of his tearful carriage ride upon seeing Aurore's obituary. He didn't believe that describing all of that was an accurate reflection of his mental state.

Susie spoke in a gentle tone, "I can sense that you're reconstructing your social connections and beginning to form friendships."

"Friends?" Lumian asked, slightly amused. "Charlie, Jenna, Franca? Can they truly be called friends?"

They are mere acquaintances!

Susie responded with a smile, “Friendship comes in various forms. Not all require deep connections. You simply need to ask yourself—when they face challenges that lie within your capabilities to solve, would you be willing to offer assistance? That will reveal if they can be considered your friends.”

“It depends on the specific circumstances and the price I must pay. I’m not the type to go out of my way to help just anyone,” Lumian muttered.

Susie didn’t press further and explained, “For someone prone to self-destruction, a sign of their emergence from the quagmire is their willingness to forge new social bonds.

“Emperor Roselle—assuming he truly said it—once remarked that humans are the sum of their social relationships. When you no longer resist forming new connections, it signifies that you’re no longer opposed to your own future.

“Of course, this is just one aspect. It’s not everything.”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before speaking again, “Madame Susie, there’s something I’d like to ask you. I mentioned a series of coincidences that have befallen me. Are they truly as Madam Magician suggested? Could they be partially influenced by Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Spectator pathway?”

In contrast to the previous session, Susie appeared more at ease. She chuckled and remarked, “Are you attempting to divert the topic? Are you still resistant to such matters?

“Actually, one can discern it from certain details. You took the initiative to request the ‘Red Boots’ lady to enlighten you on mystical matters whenever she was available, but you never followed through. The sole visit you made was on the pretext of her repaying a favor. It suggests that you remain unwilling to establish a closer bond with her.

“That’s natural. How can a patient recover after just one treatment? You need not burden yourself…”

Susie tirelessly voiced her observations, gently pinpointing some of Lumian’s current psychological issues.

“If it were the last time, I wouldn’t have been so forthright. It would have only bred resistance, causing you to close yourself off further. However, now you exhibit certain inclinations toward forging new social connections. This will allow you to gain clearer insights into your true self and facilitate your progress.”

Having his underlying thoughts laid bare by Susie, Lumian’s initial reaction was wariness, vigilance, and denial. Yet, Susie’s composed demeanor, non-aggressive analysis, and accurate understanding of the situation gradually eased his tension, enabling him to confront his deep-seated problems.

His body and mind gradually settled.

Susie refrained from prying further and addressed Lumian's inquiry.

"Madam Magician's explanation is not entirely incorrect, but it lacks specificity.

"For a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway to engineer a coincidence, they must employ face-to-face psychological cues or hypnosis. In other words, they need to be present around you, Baron Brignais, and his associates.

"The reason you didn't notice it and Baron Brignais remained oblivious is that Mid-Sequence Beyonders of the Spectator pathway possess an additional Beyonder power—Psychological Invisibility."

"Psychological Invisibility? How does it differ from regular invisibility?" Lumian inquired, perplexed.

Susie calmly elucidated, "Psychological Invisibility is not true invisibility. It merely prevents you from perceiving me, even when I am standing right before you and numerous others have already witnessed my presence."

"Sounds very magical…" Lumian sighed with a sense of wonder. For some inexplicable reason, he felt as though Psychiatrists were all around him, yet he remained oblivious to their presence.

"This won't change even if you employ Spirit Vision. Your intuition for danger will not react until I am prepared to strike," Susie continued. "By comparison, a Shadow Ascetic's concealment within shadows occasionally evokes the sensation of being watched by the darkness."

Lumian pressed, "Which pathway does Shadow Ascetic belong to?"

"Secrets Suppliant," Susie replied simply.

Secrets Suppliant pathway? Above Listener and below Shepherd, there's a Sequence known as Shadow Ascetic? This belongs to Mr. K's pathway… Occasionally, I sense someone observing me in the surrounding darkness because of him or his subordinates. Combining this with Aurore's grimoires and Madam Magician's clues, Lumian felt a wave of enlightenment.

For the Secrets Suppliant pathway, Aurore had only noted down Sequence 9 Secrets Suppliant and Sequence 8 Listener.

Madam Magician appears to write a substantial amount, but it's actually just an outline without much detail. It's not as comprehensive as Madame Susie's explanation… Lumian mumbled curiously and asked, "Aren't you concerned that revealing your pathway's Beyonder powers to me might harm you?"

Susie brushed off the question and continued, "If you're a High-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway, there's no need for such elaborate measures. Even if they're far away from you, they can subtly influence you, causing you to

unknowingly follow their arrangements and create various coincidences.

“Though I too am a Spectator, I must still caution you, ‘Beware of the Spectator!’”

High-Sequence Beyonder… Lumian was alarmed.

“So, you ‘arranged’ for the paperboy to deliver an outdated newspaper to me?”

Madame Susie is a High-Sequence Beyonder, a true demigod?

“It wasn’t me,” Susie said, feeling a tad embarrassed. “It was my companion.”

Companion? Lumian recalled Madam Magician’s initial suggestion and guessed, “The other Psychiatrist? He was here last time too?”

“Yes,” Susie candidly admitted. “Your condition is more serious, and I wasn’t too confident, so I invited her along to assist me. Yes, as a precautionary measure.

“In fact, she’s here today as well. She’s sitting across from you.”

Across from me? Lumian glanced in surprise at the empty seat across the coffee table. Not only was there no one present, but there wasn’t even an indentation from someone sitting there!

In the next instant, he heard a gentle female voice with a hint of a smile and a slightly brisk tone.

“Hello.”

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